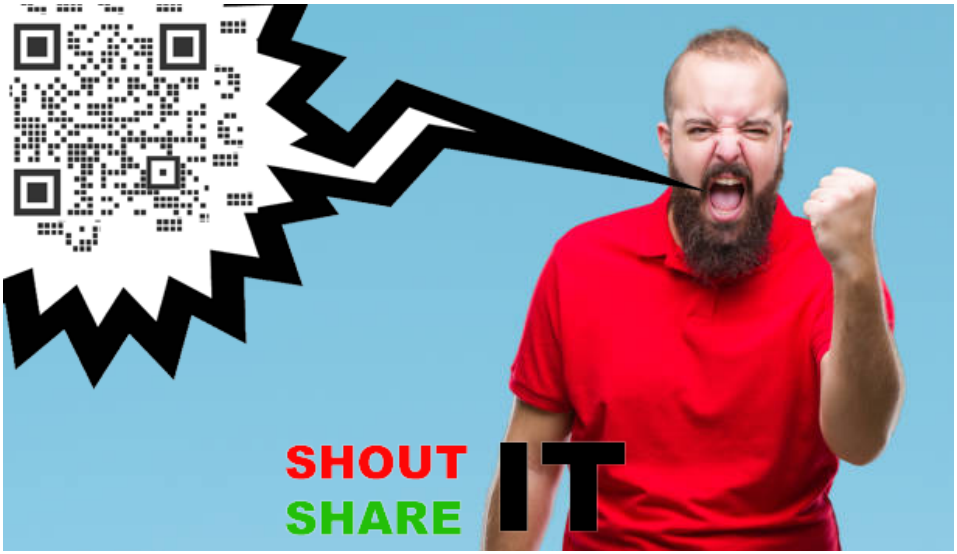
Coming of Age in Karhide

Ursula K. LeGuin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- "Well, then, it's worth it," the young man said, and opened the door and strode on out into the hubbub and panic of the sunlit halls, his shadow falling black behind him.
- About this Title

Coming of Age in Karhide
by Ursula K. Le Guin

SOV THADE TAGE EM EREB, OF RER IN KARHIDE, ON GETHEN

I live in the oldest city in the world. Long before there were kings in Karhide, Rer was a city, the marketplace and meeting ground for all the Northeast, the Plains, and Kerm Land. The Fastness of Rer was a center of learning, a refuge, a judgment seat fifteen thousand years ago. Karhide became a nation here, under the Geger kings, who ruled for a thousand years. In the thousandth year Sedern Geger, the Unking, cast the crown into the River Arre from the palace towers, proclaiming an end to dominion. The time they call the Flowering of Rer, the Summer Century, began then. It ended when the Hearth of Harge took power and moved their capital across the mountains to Erhenrang. The Old Palace has been empty for centuries. But it stands. Nothing in Rer falls down. The Arre floods through the street-tunnels every year in the Thaw, winter blizzards may bring thirty feet of snow, but the city stands. Nobody knows how old the houses are, because they have been rebuilt forever. Each one sits in its gardens without respect to the position of any of the others, as vast and random and ancient as hills. The roofed streets and canals angle about among them. Rer is all corners. We say that the Harges left because they were afraid of what might be around the corner.

Time is different here. I learned in school how the Orgota, the Ekumen, and most other people count years. They call the year of some portentous event Year One and number forward from it. Here it's always Year One. On Getheny Thern, New Year's Day, the Year One becomes one-ago, one-to-come becomes One, and so on. It's like Rer, everything always changing but the city never changing.

When I was fourteen (in the Year One, or fifty-ago) I came of age. I have been thinking about that a good deal recently.

It was a different world. Most of us had never seen an Alien, as we called them then. We might have heard the Mobile talk on the radio, and at school we saw pictures of Aliens—the ones with hair around their mouths were the most pleasingly savage and repulsive. Most of the pictures were disappointing. They looked too much like us. You couldn't even tell that they were always in kemmer. The female Aliens were supposed to have enormous breasts, but my

Mothersib Dory had bigger breasts than the ones in the pictures.

When the Defenders of the Faith kicked them out of Orgoreyn, when King Emran got into the Border War and lost Erhenrang, even when their Mobiles were outlawed and forced into hiding at Estre in Kerm, the Ekumen did nothing much but wait. They had waited for two hundred years, as patient as Handdara. They did one thing: they took our young king off-world to foil a plot, and then brought the same king back sixty years later to end her wombchild's disastrous reign. Argaven XVII is the only king who ever ruled four years before her heir and forty years after.

The year I was born (the Year One, or sixty-four-ago) was the year Argaven's second reign began. By the time I was noticing anything beyond my own toes, the war was over, the West Fall was part of Karhide again, the capital was back in Erhenrang, and most of the damage done to Rer during the Overthrow of Emran had been repaired. The old houses had been rebuilt again. The Old Palace had been patched again. Argaven XVII was miraculously back on the throne again. Everything was the way it used to be, ought to be, back to normal, just like the old days—everybody said so.

Indeed those were quiet years, an interval of recovery before Argaven, the first Gethenian who ever left our planet, brought us at last fully into the Ekumen; before we, not they, became the Aliens; before we came of age. When I was a child we lived the way people had lived in Rer forever. It is that way, that timeless world, that world around the corner, I have been thinking about, and trying to describe for people who never knew it. Yet as I write I see how also nothing changes, that it is truly the Year One always, for each child that comes of age, each lover who falls in love.

There were a couple of thousand people in the Ereb Hearths, and a hundred and forty of them lived in my Hearth, Ereb Tage. My name is Sov Thade Tage em Ereb, after the old way of naming we still use in Rer. The first thing I remember is a huge dark place full of shouting and shadows, and I am falling upward through a golden light into the darkness. In thrilling terror, I scream. I am caught in my fall, held, held close; I weep; a voice so close to me that it seems to speak through my body says softly, "Sov, Sov, Sov." And then I am given something wonderful to eat, something so sweet, so delicate that never again will I eat anything quite so good....

I imagine that some of my wild elder hearthsibs had been throwing me about, and that my mother comforted me with a bit of festival cake. Later on when I was a wild elder sib we used to play catch with babies for balls; they always screamed, with terror or with delight, or both. It's the nearest to flying anyone of my generation knew. We had dozens of different words for the way snow falls, floats,

descends, glides; blows, for the way clouds move, the way ice floats, the way boats sail; but not that word. Not yet. And so I don't remember "flying." I remember falling upward through the golden light.

Family houses in Rer are built around a big central hall. Each story has an inner balcony clear round that space, and we call the whole story, rooms and all, a balcony. My family occupied the whole second balcony of Ereb Tage. There were a lot of us. My grandmother had borne four children, and all of them had children, so I had a bunch of cousins as well as a younger and an older wombsib. "The Thades always kemmer as women and always get pregnant," I heard neighbors say, variously envious, disapproving, admiring. "And they never keep kemmer," somebody would add. The former was an exaggeration, but the latter was true. Not one of us kids had a father. I didn't know for years who my getter was, and never gave it a thought. Clannish, the Thades preferred not to bring outsiders, even other members of our own Hearth, into the family. If young people fell in love and started talking about keeping kemmer or making vows, Grandmother and the mothers were ruthless. "Vowing kemmer, what do you think you are, some kind of noble? some kind of fancy person? The kemmerhouse was good enough for me and it's good enough for you," the mothers said to their lovelorn children, and sent them away, clear off to the old Ereb Domain in the country, to hoe braties till they got over being in love.

So as a child I was a member of a flock, a school; a swarm, in and out of our warren of rooms, tearing up and down the staircases, working together and learning together and looking after the babies—in our own fashion—and terrorizing quieter hearthmates by our numbers and our noise. As far as I know we did no real harm. Our escapades were well within the rules and limits of the sedate, ancient Hearth, which we felt not as constraints but as protection, the walls that kept us safe. The only time we got punished was when my cousin Sether decided it would be exciting if we tied a long rope we'd found to the second-floor balcony railing, tied a big knot in the rope, held onto the knot, and jumped. "I'll go first," Sether said. Another misguided attempt at flight. The railing and Sether's broken leg were mended, and the rest of us had to clean the privies, all the privies of the Hearth, for a month. I think the rest of the Hearth had decided it was time the young Thades observed some discipline.

Although I really don't know what I was like as a child, I think that if I'd had any choice I might have been less noisy than my playmates, though just as unruly. I used to love to listen to the radio, and while the rest of them were racketing around the balconies or the centerhall in winter, or out in the streets and gardens in summer, I

would crouch for hours in my mother's room behind the bed, playing her old

serem-wood radio very softly so that my sibs wouldn't know I was there. I listened to anything, Lays and plays and hearthtales, the Palace news, the analyses of grain harvests and the detailed weather reports; I listened every day all one winter to an ancient saga from the Pering Storm-Border about snowghouls, perfidious traitors, and bloody ax-murders, which haunted me at night so that I couldn't sleep and would crawl into bed with my mother for comfort. Often my younger sib was already there in the warm, soft, breathing dark. We would sleep all entangled and curled up together like a nest of Pesthry.

My mother, Guyr Thade Tage em Ereb, was impatient, warm-hearted, and impartial, not exerting much control over us three wombchildren, buy keeping watch. The Thades were all tradespeople working in Ereb shops and masteries, with little or no cash to spend; but when I was ten, Guyr bought me a radio, a new one, and said where my sibs could hear, "You don't have to share it." I treasured it for years and finally shared it with my own wombchild.

So the years went along and I went along in the warmth and density and certainty of a family and a Hearth embedded in tradition, threads on the quick ever-repeating shuttle weaving the timeless web of custom and act and work and relationship, and at this distance I can hardly tell one year from the other or myself from the other children: until I turned fourteen.

The reason most people in my Hearth would remember that year is for the big party known as Dory's Somer-Forever Celebration. My Mothersib Dory had stopped going into kemmer that winter. Some people didn't do anything when they stopped going into kemmer; others went to the Fastness for a ritual; some stayed on at the Fastness for months after, or even moved there. Dory, who wasn't spiritually inclined, said, "If I can't have kids and can't have sex anymore and have to get old and die, at least I can have a party."

I have already had some trouble trying to tell this story in a language that has no somer pronouns, only gendered pronouns. In their last years of kemmer, as the hormone balance chances, many people tend to go into kemmer as men; Dory's kemmers had been male for over a year, so I'll call Dory "he," although of course the point was that he would never be either he or she again.

In any event, his party was tremendous. He invited everyone in our Hearth and the two neighboring Ereb Hearths, and it went on for three days. It had been a long winter and the spring was late and cold; people were ready for something new, something hot to happen. We cooked for a week, and a whole storeroom was packed full of beer

kegs. A lot of people who were in the middle of going out of kemmer, or had already and hadn't done anything about it, came and joined in the ritual. That's what I remember vividly: in the firelit three-story centerhall of our Hearth, a circle of thirty or forty people, all middle-aged or old, singing and dancing, stamping the drumbeats. There was a fierce energy in them, their gray hair was loose and wild, they stamped as if their feet would go through the floor, their voices were deep and strong, they were laughing. The younger people watching them seemed pallid and shadowy. I looked at the dancers and wondered, why are they happy? Aren't they old? Why do they act like they'd got free? What's it like, then, kemmer?

No, I hadn't thought much about kemmer before. What would be the use? Until we come of age we have no gender and no sexuality, our hormones don't give us any trouble at all. And in a city Hearth we never see adults in kemmer. They kiss and go. Where's Maba? In the kemmerhouse, love, now eat your porridge. When's Maba coming back? Soon, love. And in a couple of days Maba comes back, looking sleepy and shiny and refreshed and exhausted. Is it like having a bath, Maba? Yes, a bit, love, and what have you been up to while I was away?

Of course we played kemmer, when we were seven or eight. This here's the kemmerhouse and I get to be the woman. No, I do. No, I do, I thought of it! And we rubbed our bodies together and rolled around laughing, and then maybe we stuffed a ball under our shirt and were pregnant, and then we gave birth, and then we played catch with the ball. Children will play whatever adults do; but the kemmer game wasn't much of a game. It often ended in a tickling match. And most children aren't even very ticklish; till they come of age.

After Dory's party, I was on duty in the Hearth creche all through Tuwa, the last month of spring; come summer I began my fast apprenticeship, in a furniture workshop in the Third Ward. I loved getting up early and running across the city on the wayroofs and up on the curbs of the open ways; after the late Thaw some of the ways were still full of water, deep enough for kayaks and poleboats. The air would be still and cold and clear; the sun would come up behind the old towers of the Unpalace, red as blood, and all the waters and the windows of the city would flash scarlet and gold. In the workshop there was the piercing sweet smell of fresh-cut wood and the company of grown people, hard-working, patient, and demanding, taking me seriously. I wasn't a child anymore, I said to myself. I was an adult, a working person.

But why did I want to cry all the time? Why did I want to sleep all the time? Why did I get angry at Sether? Why did Sether keep bumping into me and saying "Oh sorry" in that stupid husky voice?

Why was I so clumsy with the big electric lathe that I ruined six chair-legs one after the other? "Get that kid off the lathe," shouted old Marth, and I slunk away in a fury of humiliation. I would never be a carpenter, I would never be adult, who gave a shit for chair-legs anyway?

"I want to work in the gardens," I told my mother and grandmother.

"Finish your training and you can work in the gar-dens next summer," Grand said, and Mother nodded. This sensible counsel appeared to me as a heartless injustice, a failure of love, a condemnation to despair. I Sulked. I raged.

"What's wrong with the furniture shop?" my elders asked after several days of sulk and rage.

"Why does stupid Sether have to be there!" I shouted. Dory, who was Sether's mother, raised an eyebrow and smiled.

"Are you all right?" my mother asked me as I slouched into the balcony after work, and I snarled, "I'm fine," and rushed to the privies and vomited.

I was sick. My back ached all the time. My head ached and got dizzy and heavy. Something I could not locate anywhere, some part of my soul, hurt with a keen, desolate, ceaseless pain. I was afraid of myself: of my tears, my rage, my sickness, my clumsy body. It did not feel like my body, like me. It felt like something else, an ill-fitting garment, a smelly, heavy overcoat that belonged to some old person, some dead person. It wasn't mine, it wasn't me. Tiny needles of agony shot through my nipples, hot as fire. When I winced and held my arms across my chest, I knew that everybody could see what was happening. Anybody could smell me. I smelled sour, strong, like blood, tike raw pelts of animals. My clitopenis was swollen hugely and stuck out from between my labia, and then shrank nearly to nothing, so that it hurt to piss. My labia itched and reddened as with loathsome insect-bites. Deep in my belly something moved, some monstrous growth. I was utterly ashamed. I was dying.

"Sov," my mother said, sitting down beside me on my bed, with a curious, tender, complicitous smile, "shall we choose your kemmerday?"

"I'm not in kemmer," I said passionately.

"No," Guyr said. "But next month I think you will be."

"Iwon't! "

My mother stroked my hair and face and arm. We shape each other to be human, old people used to say as they stroked babies or children or one another with those long, slow, soft caresses.

After a while my mother said, "Sether's coming in, too. But a month or so later than you, I think. Dory said let's have a double

kemmerday, but I think you should have your own day in your own time."

I burst into tears and cried, "I don't want one, I don't want to, I just want, I just want to go away...."

"Sov," my mother said, "if you want to, you can go to the kemmerhouse at Gerodda Ereb, where you won't know anybody. But I think it would be better here, where people do know you. They'd like it. They'll be so glad for you. Oh, your Grand's so proud of you! 'Have you seen that grandchild of mine, Sov, have you seen what a beauty, what amahad! ' Everybody's bored to tears hearing about you...."

Mahad is a dialect word, a Rer word; it means a strong, handsome, generous, upright person, a reliable person. My mother's stern mother, who commanded and thanked, but never praised, said I was a mahad? A terrifying idea, that dried my tears.

"All right," I said desperately, "Here. But not next month! It isn't. I'm not."

"Let me see," my mother said. Fiercely embarrassed yet relieved to obey, I stood up and undid my trousers.

My mother took a very brief and delicate look, hugged me, and said, "Next month, yes, I'm sure. You'll feel much better in a day or two. And next month it'll be different. It really will."

Sure enough, the next day the headache and the hot itching were gone, and though I was still tired and sleepy a lot of the time, I wasn't quite so stupid and clumsy at work. After a few more days I felt pretty much myself, light and easy in my limbs. Only if I thought about it there was still that queer feeling that wasn't quite in any part of my body, and that was sometimes very painful and sometimes only strange, almost something I wanted to feel again.

My cousin Sether and I had been apprenticed together at the furniture shop. We didn't go to work together because Sether was still slightly lame from that rope trick a couple of years earlier, and got a lift to work in a poleboat so long as there was water in the streets. When they closed the Arre Watergate and the ways went dry, Sether had to walk. So we walked together. The first couple of days we didn't talk much. I still felt angry at Sether. Because I couldn't run through the dawn anymore but had to walk at a lame-leg pace. And because Sether was always around. Always there. Taller than me, and quicker at the lathe, and with that long, heavy, shining hair. Why did anybody want to wear their hair so long, anyhow? I felt as if Sether's hair was in front of my own eyes.

We were walking home, tired, on a hot evening of Ockre, the first month of summer. I could see that Sether was limping and trying to hide or ignore it, trying to swing right along at my quick pace, very straight-backed, scowling. A great wave of pity and admiration

overwhelmed me, and that thing, that growth, that new being, whatever it was in my bowels and in the ground of my soul moved and turned again, turned towards Sether, aching, yearning.

"Are you coming into kemmer?" I said in a hoarse, husky voice I had never heard come out of my mouth.

"In a couple of months," Sether said in a mumble, not looking at me, still very stiff and frowning.

"I guess I have to have this, do this, you know, this stuff, pretty soon."

"I wish I could," Sether said. "Get it over with."

We did not look at each other. Very gradually, unnoticeably, I was slowing my pace till we were going along side by side at an easy walk.

"Sometimes do you feel like your tits are on fire?" I asked without knowing that I was going to say anything.

Sether nodded.

After a while, Sether said, "Listen, does your pisser get...."

I nodded.

"It must be what the Aliens look like," Sether said with revulsion. "This, this thing sticking out, it gets so big ... it gets in the way."

We exchanged and compared symptoms for a mile or so. It was a relief to talk about it, to find company in misery, but it was also frightening to hear our misery confirmed by the other. Sether burst out, "I'll tell you what I hate, what I reallyhate about it—it's dehumanizing. To get jerked around like that by your own body, to lose control, I can't stand the idea. Of being just a sex machine. And everybody just turns into something to have sex with. You know that people in kemmer go crazy anddie if there isn't anybody else in kemmer? That they'll even attack people in somer? Their own mothers?"

"They can't," I said, shocked.

"Yes they can. Tharry told me. This truck driver up in the High Kargav went into kemmer as a male while their caravan was stuck in the snow, and he was big and strong, and he went crazy and he, he did it to his cab-mate, and his cab-mate was in somer and got hurt, really hurt, trying to fight him off. And then the driver came out of kemmer and committed suicide."

This horrible story brought the sickness back up from the pit of my stomach, and I could say nothing.

Sether went on, "People in kemmer aren't even human anymore! And we have to do that—to be that way!

Now that awful, desolate fear was out in the open. Buts was not a relief to speak it. It was even larger and more terrible, spoken.

"It's stupid," Sether said. "It's a primitive device for continuing the

species. There's no need for civilized people to undergo it. People who want to get pregnant could do it with injections. It would be genetically sound. You could choose your child's getter. There wouldn't be all this inbreeding, people fucking with their sibs, like animals. Why do we have to be animals?"

Sether's rage stirred me. I shared it. I also felt shocked and excited by the word "fucking," which I had

never heard spoken. I looked again at my cousin, the thin, ruddy face, the heavy, long, shining hair. My age, Sether looked older. A half year in pain from a shattered leg had darkened and matured the adventurous, mischievous child, teaching anger, pride, endurance. "Sether," I said, "listen, it doesn't matter, you're human, even if you have to do that stuff, that fucking. You're a mahad."

"Getheny Kus," Grand said: the first day of the month of Kus, midsummer day.

"I won't be ready," I said.

"You'll be ready."

"I want to go into kemmer with Sether."

" Sether's got a month or two yet to go. Soon enough. It looks like you might be on the same moon-time, though. Dark-of-the-mooners, eh? That's what I used to be. So, just stay on the same wavelength, you and Sether...." Grand had never grinned at me this way, an inclusive grin, as if I were an equal.

My mother's mother was sixty years old, short, brawny, broad-hipped, with keen clear eyes, a stone-mason by trade, an unquestioned autocrat in the Hearth. I, equal to this formidable person? It was my first intimation that I might be becoming more, rather than less, human.

"I'd like it," said Grand, "if you spent this half-month at the Fastness. But it's up to you."

"At the Fastness?" I said, taken by surprise. We Thades were all Handdara, but very inert Handdara, keeping only the great festivals, muttering the grace all in one garbled word, practicing none of the disciplines. None of my older hearthsibs had been sent off to the Fastness before their kemmerday. Was there something wrong with me?

"You've got a good brain," said Grand. "You and Sether. I'd like to see some of you lot casting some shadows, some day. We Thades sit here in our Hearth and breed like pesthry. Is that enough? It'd be a good thing if some of you got your heads out of the bedding."

"What do they do in the Fastness?" I asked, and Grand answered frankly, "I don't know. Go find out. They teach you. They can teach you how to control kemmer."

"All right," I said promptly. I would tell Sether that the Indwellers

could control kemmer. Maybe I could learn how to do it and come home and teach it to Sether.

Grand looked at me with approval. I had taken up the challenge.

Of course I didn't learn how to control kemmer, in a halfmonth in the Fastness. The first couple of days there, I thought I wouldn't even be able to control my homesickness. From our warm, dark warren of rooms full of people talking, sleeping, eating, cooking, washing, playing remma, playing music, kids running around, noise, family, I went across the city to a huge, clean, cold, quiet house of strangers. They were courteous, they treated me with respect. I was terrified. Why should a person of forty, who knew magic disciplines of superhuman strength and fortitude, who could walk barefoot through blizzards, who could Foretell, whose eyes were the wisest and calmest I had ever seen, why should an Adept of the Handdara respect me?

"Because you are so ignorant," Ranharrer the Adept said, smiling, with great tenderness.

Having me only for a halfmonth, they didn't try to influence the nature of my ignorance very much. I practiced the Untrance several hours a day, and came to like it: that was quite enough for them, and they praised me. "At fourteen, most people go crazy moving slowly," my teacher said.

During my last six or seven days in the Fastness certain symptoms began to show up again, the headache, the swellings and shooting pains, the irritability. One morning the sheet of my cot in my bare, peaceful little room was bloodstained. I looked at the smear with horror and loathing. I thought I had scratched my itching labia to bleeding in my sleep, but I knew also what the blood was. I began to cry. I had to wash the sheet somehow. I had fouled, defiled this place where everything was clean, austere, and beautiful.

An old Indweller, finding me scrubbing desperately at the sheet in the washrooms, said nothing, but brought me some soap that bleached away the stain. I went back to my room, which I had come to love with the passion of one who had never before known any actual privacy, and crouched on the sheetless bed, miserable, checking every few minutes to be sure I was not bleeding again. I missed my Untrance practice time. The immense house was very quiet. Its peace sank into me. Again I felt that strangeness in my soul, but it was not pain now; it was a desolation like the air at evening, like the peaks of the Kargav seen far in the west in the clarity of winter. It was an immense enlargement.

Ranharrer the Adept knocked and entered at my word, looked at me for a minute, and asked gently, "What is it?"

"Everything is strange," I said.

The Adept smiled radiantly and said, "Yes."

I know now how Ranharrer cherished and honored my ignorance, in the Handdara sense. Then I knew only that somehow or other I had said the right thing and so pleased a person I wanted very much to please.

"We're doing some singing," Ranharrer said, "you might like to hear it."

They were in fact singing the Midsummer Chant, which goes on for the four days before Getheny Kus, night and day. Singers and drummers drop in and out at will, most of them singing on certain syllables in an endless group improvisation guided only by the drums and by melodic cues in the Chantbook, and failing into harmony with the soloist if one is present. At first I heard only a pleasantly thick-textured, droning sound over a quiet and subtle beat. I listened till I got bored and decided I could do it too. So I opened my mouth and sang "Aah" and heard all the other voices singing "Aah" above and with and below mine until I lost mine and heard only all the voices, and then only the music itself, and then suddenly the startling silvery rush of a single voice running across the weaving, against the current, and sinking into it and vanishing, and rising out of it again.... Ranharrer touched my arm. It was time for dinner, I had been singing since Third Hour. I went back to the chantry after dinner, and after supper. I spent the next three days there. I would have spent the nights there if they had let me. I wasn't sleepy at all anymore. I had sudden, endless energy, and couldn't sleep. In my little room I sang to mysrelf, or read the strange Handdara poetry which was the only book they had given me, and practiced the Untrance, trying to ignore the heat and cold, the fire and ice in my body, till dawn came and I could go sing again.

And then it was Ottormenbod, midsummer's eve, and I must go home to my Hearth and the kemmer-house.

To my surprise, my mother and grandmother and all the elders came to the Fastness to fetch me,

wearing ceremonial hiebs and looking solemn. Ranharrer handed me over to them, saying to me only, "Come back to us." My family paraded me through the streets in the hot summer morning; all the vines were in flower, perfuming the air, all the gardens were blooming, bearing, fruiting. "This is an excellent time," Grand said judiciously, "to come into kemmer."

The Hearth looked very dark to me after the Fastness, and somehow shrunken. I looked around for Sether, but it was a workday, Sether was at the shop. That gave me a sense of holiday, which was not unpleasant. And then up in the hearthroom of our balcony, Grand and the Hearth elders formally presented me with a whole set of new clothes, new everything, from the boots up, topped by a magnificently

embroidered hieb. There was a spoken ritual that went with the clothes, not Handdara; I think, but a tradition of our Hearth; the words were all old and strange, the language of a thousand years ago. Grand rattled them out like somebody spitting rocks, and put the hieb on my shoulders. Everybody said, "Haya!"

All the elders, and a lot of younger kids, hung around helping me put on the new clothes as if I was a king or a baby, and some of the elders wanted to give me advice—"last advice," they called it, since you gain shifgrethor when you go into kemmer, and once you have shifgrethor advice is insulting. "Now you just keep away from that old Ebbeche," one of them told me shrilly. My mother took offense, snapping, "Keep your shadow to yourself, Tadsh!" And to me, "Don't listen to the old fish. Flapmouth Tadsh! But now listen, Sov."

I listened. Guyr had drawn me a little away from the others, and spoke gravely, with some embarrassment. "Remember, it will matter who you're with first."

I nodded. "I understand," I said.

"No, you don't," my mother snapped, forgetting to be embarrassed. "Just keep it in mind!"

"What, ah," I said. My mother waited. "If I, if I go into, as a, as female," I said. "Don't I, shouldn't I—?"

"Ah," Guyr said. "Don't worry. It'll be a year or more before you can conceive. Or get. Don't worry, this time. The other people will see to it, just in case. They all know it's your first kemmer. But do keep it in mind, who you're with first! Around, oh, around Karrid, and Ebbeche, and some of them."

"Come on!" Dory shouted, and we all got into a procession again to go downstairs and across the centerhall, where everybody cheered "Haya Sov! Haya Sov!" and the cooks beat on their saucepans. I wanted to die. But they all seemed so cheerful, so happy about me, wishing me well; I wanted also to live.

We went out the west door and across the sunny gardens and came to the kemmerhouse. Tage Ereb shares a kemmerhouse with two other Ereb Hearths; it's a beautiful building, all carved with deep-figure friezes in the Old Dynasty style, terribly worn by the weather of a couple of thousand years. On the red stone steps my family all kissed me, murmuring, "Praise then Darkness," or "In the act of creation praise," and my mother gave me a hard push on my shoulders, what they call the sledge-push, for good luck, as I turned away from them and went in the door.

The doorkeeper was waiting for me; a queer-looking, rather stooped person, with coarse, pale skin.

Now I realized who this "Ebbeche" they'd been talking about was. I'd never met him, but I'd heard about him. He was the Doorkeeper of

our kemmerhouse, a halfdead—that is, a person in permanent kemmer, like the Aliens.

There are always a few people born that way here. Some of them can be cured; those who can't or choose not to be usually live in a Fastness and learn the disciplines, or they become Doorkeepers. It's convenient for them, and for normal people too. After all, who else would want tolive in a kemmerhouse? But there are drawbacks. If you come to the kemmerhouse in thorharmen, ready to gender, and the first person you meet is fully male, his pheromones are likely to gender you female right then, whether that's what you had in mind this month or not. Responsible Doorkeepers, of course, keep well away from anybody who doesn't invite them to come close. But permanent kemmer may not lead to responsibility of character; nor does being calledhalfdead andpervert all your life, I imagine. Obviously my family didn't trust Ebbeche to keep his hands and his pheromones off me. But they were unjust. He honored a first kemmer as much as anyone else. He greeted me by name and showed me where to take off my new boots. Then he began to speak the ancient ritual welcome, backing down the hall before me; the first time I ever heard the words I would hear so many times again for so many years.

You cross earth now.

You cross water now.

You cross the Ice now ....

And the exulting ending, as we came into the centerhall:

Together we have crossed the Ice.

Together we come into the Hearthplace,

Into life, bringing life!

In the act of creation, praise!

The solemnity of the words moved me and distracted me somewhat from my intense self-consciousness. As I had in the Fastness, I felt the familiar reassurance of being part of something immensely older and larger than myself, even if it was strange and new to me. I must entrust myself to it and be what it made me. At the same time I was intensely alert. All my senses were extraordinarily keen, as they had been all morning. I was aware of everything, the beautiful blue color of the walls, the lightness and vigor of my steps as I walked, the texture of the wood under my bare feet, the sound and meaning of the ritual words, the Doorkeeper himself. He fascinated me. Ebbeche was certainly not handsome, and yet I noticed how musical his rather deep voice was; and pale skin was more attractive than I had ever thought it. I felt that he had been maligned, that his life must be a strange one. I wanted to talk to him. But as he finished the welcome, standing aside for me at the doorway of the centerhall, a tall person strode forward eagerly to meet me.

I was glad to see a familiar face: it was the head cook of my Hearth, Karrid Arrage. Like many cooks a rather fierce and temperamental person, Karrid had often taken notice of me, singling me out in a joking, challenging way, tossing me some delicacy—"Here, youngun! get some meat on your bones!" As I saw Karrid now I went through the most extraordinary multiplicity of awarenesses: that Karrid was naked and that this nakedness was not like the nakedness of people in the Hearth, but a significant nakedness—that he was not the Karrid I had seen before but transfigured into great beauty—that he washe —that my mother had warned me about him—that I wanted to touch him—that I was afraid of him.

He picked me right up in his arms and pressed me against him. I felt his clitopenis like a fist between my legs. "Easy, now," the Doorkeeper said to him, and some other people came forward from the room, which I could see only as large, dimly glowing, full of shadows and mist.

"Don't worry, don't worry," Karrid said to me and them, with his hard laugh. "I won't hurt my own get, will I? I just want to be the one that gives her kemmer. As a woman, like a proper Thade. I want to give you that joy, little Sov." He was undressing me as he spoke, slipping off my hieb and shirt with big, hot, hasty hands. The Doorkeeper and the others kept close watch, but did not interfere. I felt totally defenseless, helpless, humiliated. I struggled to get free, broke loose, and tried to pick up and put on my shirt. I was shaking and felt terribly weak, I could hardly stand up. Karrid helped me clumsily; his big arm supported me. I leaned against him, feeling his hot, vibrant skin against mine, a wonderful feeling, like sunlight, like firelight. I leaned more heavily against him, raising my arms so that our sides slid together. "Hey, now," he said. "Oh, you beauty, oh, you Sov, here, take her away, this won't do!" And he backed right away from me, laughing and yet really alarmed, his clitopenis standing up amazingly. I stood there half-dressed, on my rubbery legs, bewildered. My eyes were full of mist, I could see nothing clearly.

"Come on," somebody said, and took my hand, a soft, cool touch totally different from the fire of Karrid's skin. It was a person from one of the other Hearths, I didn't know her name. She seemed to me to shine like gold in the dim, misty place. "Oh, you're going so fast," she said, laughing and admiring and consoling. "Come on, come into the pool, take it easy for a while. Karrid shouldn't have come on to you like that! But you're lucky, first kemmer as a woman, there's nothing like it. I kemmered as a man three times before I got to kemmer as a woman, it made me so mad, every time I got into thorharmen all my damn friends would all be women already. Don't worry about me—I'd say Karrid's influence was decisive," and she laughed again. "Oh, you

are so pretty!" and she bent her head and licked my nipples before I knew what she was doing.

It was wonderful, it cooled that stinging fire in them that nothing else could cool. She helped me finish undressing, and we stepped together into the warm water of the big, shallow pool that filled the whole center of this room. That was why it was so misty, why the echoes were so strange. The water lapped on my thighs, on my sex, on my belly. I turned to my friend and leaned forward to kiss her. It was a perfectly natural thing to do, it was what she wanted and I wanted, and I wanted her to lick and suck my nipples again, and she did. For a long time we lay in the shallow water playing, and I could have played forever. But then somebody else joined us, taking hold of my friend from behind, and she arched her body in the water like a golden fish leaping, threw her back, and began to play with him.

I got out of the water and dried myself, feeling sad and shy and forsaken, and yet extremely interested in what had happened to my body. It felt wonderfully alive and electric, so that the roughness of the towel made me shiver with pleasure. Somebody had come closer to me, somebody that had been watching me play with my friend in the water. He sat down by me now.

It was a hearthmate a few years older than I, Arrad Tehemmy. I had worked in the gardens with Arrad all last summer, and liked him. He looked like Sether, I now thought, with heavy black hair and a long, thin face, but in him was that shining, that glory they all had here—all the kemmerers, thewomen , themen —such vivid beauty as I had never seen in any human beings. "Sov," he said, "I'd like—Your first—Will you—" His hands were already on me, and mine on him. "Come," he said, and I went with him. He took me into a beautiful little room, in which there was nothing but a fire burning in a fireplace, and a wide bed. There Arrad took me into his arms and I took Arrad into my arms, and then between my legs, and fell upward, upward through the golden light.

Arrad and I were together all that first night, and besides fucking a great deal, we ate a great deal. It had not occurred to me that there would be food at a kemmerhouse, I had thought you weren't allowed to do anything but fuck. There was a lot of food, very good, too, set out so that you could eat whenever you

wanted. Drink was more limited; the person in charge, an old woman-halfdead, kept her canny eye on you, and wouldn't give you any more beer if you showed signs of getting wild or stupid. I didn't need any more beer. I didn't need any more fucking. I was complete. I was in love forever for all time all my life to eternity with Arrad. But Arrad (who was a day father into kemmer than I) fell asleep and wouldn't wake up, and an extraordinary person named Hama sat

down by me and began talking and also running his hand up and down my back in the most delicious way, so that before long we got further entangled, and began fucking, and it was entirely different with Hama than it had been with Arrad, so that I realized that I must be in love with Hama, until Gehardar joined us. After that I think I began to understand that I loved them all and they all loved me and that that was the secret of the kemmerhouse.

It's been nearly fifty years, and I have to admit I do not recall everyone from my first kemmer; only Karrid and Arrad, Hama and Gehardar, old Tubanny, the most exquisitely skillful lover as a male that I ever knew—I met him often in later kemmers—and Berre, my golden fish, with whom I ended up in drowsy, peaceful, blissful lovemaking in front of the great hearth till we both fell asleep. And when we woke we were not women. We were not men. We were not in kemmer. We were very tired young adults.

"You're still beautiful," I said to Berre.

"So are you," Berre said. "Where do you work?"

"Furniture shop, Third Ward."

I tried licking Berre's nipple, but it didn't work; Berre flinched a little, and I said "Sorry," and we both laughed.

"I'm in the radio trade," Berre said. "Did you ever think of trying that?"

"Making radios?"

"No. Broadcasting. I do the Fourth Hour news and weather."

"That's you?" I said, awed.

"Come over to the tower some time, I'll show you around," said Berre.

Which is how I found my lifelong trade and a life-long friend. As I tried to tell Sether when I came back to the Hearth, kemmer isn't exactly what we thought it was; it's much more complicated.

Sether's first kemmer was on Getheny Gor, the first day of the first month of autumn, at the dark of the moon. One of the family brought Sether into kemmer as a woman, and then Sether brought me in. That was the first time I kemmered as a man. And we stayed on the same wavelength, as Grand put it. We never conceived together, being cousins and having some modern scruples, but we made love in every combination, every dark of the moon, for years. And Sether brought my child, Tamor, into first kemmer—as a woman, like a proper Thade.

Later on Sether went into the Handdara, and became an Indweller in the old Fastness, and now is an Adept. I go over there often to join in one of the Chants or practice the Untrance or just to visit, and every few days Sether comes back to the Hearth. And we talk. The old days or the new times, somer or kemmer, love is love.

DARKNESS BOX

Ursula K. Le Guin

[07 feb 2002—scanned, proofed and released for #bookz]

Ursula K. Le Guin is one of the finest contemporary fantasy writers, winner of many awards (the Hugo, the Nebula, the National Book Award among others) and author of many popular books, including the contemporary classic, the Earthsea trilogy, second only to Tolkien's famous "Ring" trilogy in renown. Here is a less familiar piece, a fantasy story about light and dark, life and war and magic, filled with omens of impending doom. It is sharply and cleanly written, like a fine blade honed and polished, cold steel. It's a story about death.

On soft sand by the sea's edge a little boy walked leaving no footprints. Gulls cried in the bright sunless sky, trout leaped from the saltless ocean. Ear off on the horizon the sea serpent raised himself a moment in seven enormous arches and then, bellowing, sank. The child whistled but the sea serpent, busy hunting whales, did not surface again. The child walked on casting no shadow, leaving no tracks on the sand between the cliffs and the sea. Ahead of him rose a grassy headland on which stood a four-legged hut. As he climbed a path up the cliff the hut skipped about and rubbed its front legs together like a lawyer or a fly; but the hands of the clock inside, which said ten minutes of ten, never moved.

"What's that you've got there, Dicky?" asked his mother as she added parsley and a pinch of pepper to the rabbit stew simmering in an alembic.

"A box, Mummy."

"Where did you find it?"

Mummy's familiar leaped down from the onion-festooned rafters and, draping itself like a foxfur round her neck, said, "By the sea."

Dicky nodded. "That's right. The sea washed it up."

"And what's inside it?"

The familiar said nothing, but purred. The witch turned round to look into her son's round face. "What's in it?" she repeated.

"Darkness."

"Oh? Let's see."

As she bent down to look, the familiar, still purring, shut its eyes. Holding the box against his chest, the little boy very carefully lifted the lid a scant inch.

"So it is," said his mother. "Now put it away, don't let it get knocked about. I wonder where the key got to. Run wash your hands now. Table, lay!" And while the child worked the heavy pump handle in the yard and splashed his face and hands, the hut resounded with the clatter of plates and forks materializing.

After the meal, while his mother was having her morning nap,

Dicky took down the water-bleached, sand-encrusted box from his treasure shelf and set out with it across the dunes, away from the sea. Close at his heels the black familiar followed him, trotting patiently over the sand through the coarse grass, the only shadow he had.

At the summit of the pass Prince Rikard turned in the saddle to look back over the plumes and pennants of his army, over the long falling road, to the towered walls of his father's city. Under the sunless sky it shimmered there on the plain, fragile and shadowless as a pearl. Seeing it so he knew it could never be taken, and his heart sang with pride. He gave his captains the signal for quick march and set spurs to his horse. It reared and broke into a gallop, while his gryphon swooped and screamed overhead. She teased the white horse, diving straight down at it clashing her beak, swerving aside just in time; the horse, bridleless, would snap furiously at her snaky tail or rear to strike out with silver hoofs. The gryphon would cackle and roar, circle back over the dunes, and with a screech and swoop play the trick all over. Afraid she might wear herself out before the battle, Rikard finally leashed her, after which she flew along steadily, purring and chirping, by his side.

The sea lay before him; somewhere beneath the cliffs the enemy force his brother led was hidden. The road wound down growing sandier, the sea appearing to right or left always nearer. Abruptly the road fell away; the white horse leaped the ten-foot drop and galloped out over the beach. As he came out from between the dunes Rikard saw a long line of men strung out on the sand, and behind them three black-prowed ships. His own men were scrambling down the drop, swarming over the dunes, blue flags snapping in the sea wind, voices faint against the sound of the sea. Without warning or parley the two forces met, sword to sword and man to man. With a great shrilling scream the gryphon soared up, jerking the leash from Rikard's hand, then dropped like a falcon, beak and claws extended, down on a tall man in gray, the enemy leader. But the tall man's sword was drawn. As the iron beak snapped on his shoulder, trying to get the throat, the iron sword jabbed out and up, slashing the gryphon's belly. She doubled up in air and fell, knocking the man down with the sweep of her great wing, screaming, blackening the sand with blood. The tall man staggered up and slashed off her head and wings, turning half blinded with sand and blood only when Rikard was almost on him. Without a word he turned, lifting his steaming sword to parry Rikard's blow. He tried to strike at the horse's legs, but got no chance, for the beast would back and rear and run at him, Rikard's sword slashing down from above. The tall man's arms began to grow heavy, his breath came in gasps. Rikard gave no quarter. Once more the tall man raised his sword, lunged, and took the whizzing slash of his brother's

sword straight across his uplifted face. He fell without a word. Brown sand fell over his body in a little shower from the white stallion's hoofs as Rikard spurred back to the thick of the fight.

The attackers fought on doggedly, always fewer of them, and those few being pushed back step by step toward the sea. When only a knot of twenty or so remained they broke, sprinting desperately for the ships, pushing them off chest-deep in the breakers, clambering aboard. Rikard shouted to his men. They came to him across the sand, picking their way among hacked corpses. The badly wounded tried to crawl to him on hands and knees. All that could walk gathered in ranks in a hollow behind the dune on which Rikard stood. Behind him, out on deep water, the three black ships lay motionless, balanced on their oars.

Rikard sat down, alone on the dune top among the rank grass. He bowed his head and put his hands over his face. Near him the white horse stood still as a horse of stone. Below him his men stood silent. Behind him on the beach the tall man, his face obliterated in blood, lay near the body of the gryphon, and the other dead lay staring at the sky where no sun shone.

A little gust of wind blew by. Rikard raised his face, which though young was very grim. He signaled his captains, swung up into the saddle, and set off round the dunes and back toward the city at a trot, not waiting to see the black ships steer in to shore where their soldiers could board them, or his own army fill up its ranks and come marching behind him. When the gryphon swooped screaming overhead he raised his arm, grinning at the great creature as she tried to perch on his gloved wrist, flapping her wings and screeching like a tomcat. "You no-good gryphon," he said, "you hen, go home to your chicken coop!" Insulted, the monster yawped and sailed off eastward toward the city. Behind him his army wound upward through the hills, leaving no track. Behind them the brown sand lay smooth as silk, stainless. The black ships, sails set, already stood out well to sea. In the prow of the first stood a tall, grim-faced man in gray.

Taking an easier road homeward, Rikard passed not far from the four-legged hut on the headland. The witch stood in the doorway, hailing him. He galloped over, and, drawing rein right at the gate of the little yard, he looked at the young witch. She was bright and dark as coals, her black hair whipped in the sea wind. She looked at him, white-armored on a white horse.

"Prince," she said, "you'll go to battle once too often."

He laughed. "What should I do—let my brother lay siege to the city?"

"Yes, let him. No man can take the city."

"I know. But my father the king exiled him, he must not set foot

even on our shore. I'm my father's soldier, I fight as he commands."

The witch looked out to sea, then back at the young man. Her dark face sharpened, nose and chin peaking cronelike, eyes flashing. "Serve and be served," she said, "rule and be ruled. Your brother chose neither to serve nor rule ... Listen, prince, take care." Her face warmed again to beauty. "The sea brings presents this morning, the wind blows, the crystals break. Take care."

Gravely he bowed his thanks, then wheeled his horse and was gone, white as a gull over the long curve of the dunes.

The witch went back into the hut, glancing about its one room to see that everything was in place: bats, onions, cauldrons, carpets, broom, toad-stones, crystal balls (cracked through), the thin crescent moon hung up on the chimney, the Books, the familiar—She looked again, then hurried out and called, "Dicky!"

The wind from the west was cold now, bending the coarse grass down.

"Dicky! ... Kitty, kitty kitty!"

The wind caught the voice from her lips, tore it into bits, and blew it away.

She snapped her fingers. The broom came zooming out the door, horizontal and about two feetoff the ground, while the hut shivered and hopped about in excitement. "Shut up!" the witch snapped, and the door obediently slammed. Mounting the broom she took off in a long gliding swoop southward down the beach, now and then crying out, "Dicky! ... Here, kitty, kitty, kitty!"

The young prince, rejoining his men, had dismounted to walk with them. As they reached the pass and saw the city below them on the plain, he felt a tug at his cloak.

"Prince—"

A little boy, so little he was still fat and round-cheeked, stood with a scared look, holding up a battered, sandy box. Beside him a black cat sat smiling broadly. "The sea brought this—it's for the prince of the land, I know it is—please take it!"

"What's in it?"

"Darkness, sir."

Rikard took the box and after a slight hesitation opened it a little, just a crack. "It's painted black inside," he said with a hard grin.

"No, prince, truly it's not. Open it wider!"

Cautiously Rikard lifted the lid higher, an inch or two, and peered in. Then he shut it quickly, even as the child said, "Don't let the wind blow it out, prince!"

"I shall take this to the king."

"But it's for you, sir—"

"All seagifts are the king's. But thank you for it, boy." They looked

at each other for a moment, the little round boy and the hard splendid youth; then Rikard turned and strode on, while Dicky wandered back down the hills, silent and disconsolate. He heard his mother's voice from far away to the south, and tried to answer; but the wind blew his call landward, and the familiar had disappeared.

The bronze gates of the city swung open as the troop approached. Watchdogs bayed, guards stood rigid, the people of the city bowed down as Rikard on his horse clattered at full gallop up the marble streets to the palace. Entering, he glanced up at the great bronze clock on the bell tower, the highest of the nine white towers of the palace. The moveless hands said ten minutes of ten.

In the Hall of Audience his father awaited him: a fierce gray-haired man crowned with iron, his hands clenched on the heads of iron chimaeras that formed the arms of the throne. Rikard knelt and with bowed

head, never looking up, reported the success of his foray. "The Exile was killed, with the greater pan of his men; the rest fled in their ships."

A voice answered like an iron door moving on unused hinges: "Well done, prince."

"I bring you a seagift, Lord." Still with head bowed, Rikard held up the wooden box.

A low snarl came from the throat of one of the carven monsters of the throne.

"That is mine," said the old king so harshly that Rikard glanced up for a second, seeing the teeth of the chimaeras bared and the king's eyes glittering.

"Therefore I bring it to you, Lord."

"That is mine—I gave it to the sea, I myself! And the sea spits back my gift." A long silence, then the king spoke more softly. "Well, keep it, prince. The sea doesn't want it, nor do I. It's in your hands. Keep it—locked. Keep it locked, prince!"

Rikard, on his knees, bowed lower in thanks and consent, then rose and backed down the long hall, never looking up. As he came out into the glittering anteroom, officers and noblemen gathered round him, ready as usual to ask about the battle, laugh, drink, and chatter. He passed among them without a word or glance and went to his own quarters, alone, carrying the box carefully in both hands.

His bright, shadowless, windowless room was decorated on every wall with patterns of gold inset with topazes, opals, crystals, and, most vivid of all jewels, candle flames moveless on golden sconces. He set the box down on a glass table, threw off his cloak, unbuckled his swordbelt, and sat down sighing. The gryphon loped in from his bedroom, talons rasping on the mosaic floor, stuck her great head

onto his knees, and waited for him to scratch her feathery mane. There was also a cat prowling around the room, a sleek black one; Rikard took no notice. The palace was full of animals, cats, hounds, apes, squirrels, young hippogriffs, white mice, tigers. Every lady had her unicorn, every courtier had a dozen pets. The prince had only one, the gryphon which always fought for him, his one unquestioning friend. He scratched the gryphon's mane, often glancing down to meet the loving golden gaze of her round eyes, now and then glancing too at the box on the table. There was no key to lock it.

Music played softly in a distant room, a ceaseless interweaving of notes like the sound of a fountain.

He turned to look at the clock on the mantel, an ornate square of gold and blue enamel. It was ten minutes of ten: time to rise and buckle on his sword, call up his men, and go to battle. The Exile was returning, determined to take the city and reclaim his right to the throne, his inheritance. His black ships must be driven back to sea. The brothers must fight, and one must die, and the city be saved. Rikard rose, and at once the gryphon jumped up lashing her tail, eager for the fight. "All right, come along!" Rikard told her, but his voice was cold. He took up his sword in the pearl-encrusted sheath and buckled it on, and the gryphon whined with excitement and rubbed her beak on his hand. He did not respond. He was tired and sad, he longed for something—for what? To hear music that ceased, to speak to his brother once before they fought ... he did not know. Heir and defender, he must obey. He set the silver helmet on his head and turned to pick up his cloak, flung over a chair. The pearly sheath slung from his belt clattered against something behind him; he turned and saw the box, lying on the floor, open. As he stood looking at it with the same cold, absent look, a little blackness like smoke gathered about it on the floor. He stooped and picked it up, and darkness ran out over his hands.

The gryphon backed away, whining.

Tall and white-armored, fair-haired, silver-capped in the glittering shadowless room, Rikard stood holding the open box, watching the thick dusk that dripped slowly from it. All around his body now, below his hands, was twilight. He stood still. Then slowly he raised the box up, clear up over his head, and turned it upside down.

Darkness flowed over his face. He looked about him, for the distant music had stopped and things were very silent. Candles burned, dots of light picking out flecks of gold and flashes of violet from walls and ceiling. But all the corners were dark, behind each chair lay darkness, and as Rikard turned his head his shadow leapt along the wall. He moved then, quickly, dropping the box, for in one of the black corners he had glimpsed the reddish glow of two great

eyes. The gryphon, of course. He held out his hand and spoke to her. She did not move, but gave a queer metallic cry.

"Come on! Are you afraid of the dark?" he said, and then all at once was afraid himself. He drew his sword. Nothing moved. He took a step backward toward the door, and the monster jumped. He saw the black wings spread across the ceiling, the iron beak, the talons; her bulk was on him before he could stab upward. He wrestled, the great beak snapping at his throat and the talons tearing at his arms and chest, till he got his sword arm free and could slash down, pull away, and slash again. The second blow half severed the gryphon's neck. She dropped off, lay writhing in the shadows among splinters of glass, then lay still.

Rikard's sword dropped clattering on the floor. His hands were sticky with his own blood, and he could hardly see; the beating of the gryphon's wings had blown out or knocked over every candle but one. He groped his way to a chair and sat down. After a minute, though he still gasped for breath, he did as he had done on the dune top after battle: bowed his head and hid his face in his hands. It was completely silent. The one candle flickered in its sconce, mirrored feebly in a cluster of topazes on the wall behind it. Rikard raised his head.

The gryphon lay still. Its blood had spread out in a pool, black as the first spilt darkness from the box.

Its iron beak was open, its eyes open, like two red stones.

"It's dead," said a small soft voice, as the witch's cat came picking its way delicately among the fragments of the smashed table. "Once and for all. Listen, prince!" The cat sat down curling its tail neatly round its paws. Rikard stood motionless, blank-faced, till a sudden sound made him start: a little ting nearby! Then from the tower overhead a huge dull bell stroke reverberated in the stone of the floor, in his ears, in his blood. The clocks were striking ten.

There was a pounding at his door, and shouts echoed down the palace corridors mixed with the last booming strokes of the bell, screams of scared animals, calls, commands.

"You'll be late for the battle, prince," said the cat.

Rikard groped among blood and shadow for his sword, sheathed it, flung on his cloak, and went to the door.

"There'll be an afternoon today," the cat said, "and a twilight, and night will fall. At nightfall one of you will come home to the city, you or your brother. But only one of you, prince."

Rikard stood still a moment. "Is the sun shining now, outside?"

"Yes, it is—now."

"Well, then, it's worth it," the young man said, and opened the door and strode on out into the hubbub and panic of the sunlit halls, his shadow falling black behind him.

URSULA K. LEGUIN DARKROSE AND DIAMOND A Boat-Song from West Havnor Where my love is going There will I go. Where his boat is rowing I will row. We will laugh together, Together we will cry. If he lives I will live, If he dies

I die. Where my love is going There will I go. Where his boat is rowing I will row. In the west of Havnor, among hills forested with oak and chestnut, is the town of Glade. A while ago, the rich man of that town was a merchant called Golden. Golden owned the mill that cut the oak boards for the ships they built in Havnor South Port and Havnor Great Port; he owned the biggest chestnut groves; he owned the carts and hired the carters that carried the timber and the chestnuts over the hills to be sold. He did very well from trees, and when his son was born, the mother said, "We could call him Chestnut, or Oak, maybe?" But the father said, "Diamond," diamond being in his estimation the one thing more precious than gold. So little Diamond grew up in the finest house in Glade, a fat, bright-eyed baby, a ruddy, cheerful boy. He had a sweet singing voice, a true ear, and a love of music, so that his mother, Tuly, called him Songsparrow and Skylark, among other loving names, for she never really did like "Diamond." He trilled and carolled about the house; he knew any tune as soon as he heard it, and invented tunes when he heard none. His mother had the wisewoman Tangle teach him The Creation of Ea and The Deed of the Young King, and at Sunreturn when he was eleven years old he sang the Winter Carol for the Lord of the Western Land, who was visiting his domain in the hills above Glade. The Lord and his Lady praised the boy's singing and gave him a tiny gold box with a diamond set in the lid, which seemed a kind and pretty gift to Diamond and his mother. But Golden was a bit impatient with the singing and the trinkets. "There are more important things for you to do, son," he said. "And greater prizes to be earned." Diamond thought his father meant the business -- the loggers, the sawyers, the sawmill, the chestnut groves, the pickers, the carters, the carts -- all that work and talk and planning, complicated, adult matters. He never felt that it had much

to do with him, so how was he to have as much to do with it as his father expected? Maybe he'd find out when he grew up. But in fact Golden wasn't thinking only about the business. He had observed something about his son that had made him not exactly set his eyes higher than the business, but glance above it from time to time, and then shut his eyes. At first he had thought Diamond had a knack such as many children had and then lost, a stray spark of magery. When he was a little boy, Golden himself had been able to make his own shadow shine and sparkle. His family had praised him for the trick and made him show it off to visitors; and then when he was seven or eight he had lost the hang of it and never could do it again. When he saw Diamond come down the stairs without touching the stairs, he thought his eyes had deceived him; but a few days later, he saw the child float up the stairs, just a finger gliding along the oaken banister-rail. "Can you do that coming down?" Golden asked, and Diamond said, "Oh, yes, like this," and sailed back down smooth as a cloud on the south wind. "How did you learn to do that?" "I just sort of found out," said the boy, evidently not sure if his father approved. Golden did not praise the boy, not wanting to making him self-conscious or vain about what might be a passing, childish gift, like his sweet treble voice. There was too much fuss already made over that. But a year or so later he saw Diamond out in the back garden with his playmate Rose. The children were squatting on their haunches, heads close together, laughing. Something intense or uncanny about them made him pause at the window on the stairs landing and watch them. A thing between them was leaping up and down, a frog? a toad? a big cricket? He went out into the garden and came up near them, moving so quietly, though he was a big man, that they in their absorption did not hear him. The thing that was hopping up and down on the grass between their bare toes was a rock. When Diamond raised his hand the rock jumped up in the air, and when he shook his hand a little the rock hovered in the air, and when he flipped his fingers downward it fell to earth. "Now you," Diamond said to Rose, and she started to do what he had done, but the rock only twitched a little. "Oh," she whispered, "there's your dad." "That's very clever," Golden said. "Di thought it up," Rose said. Golden did not like the child. She was both outspoken and defensive, both rash and timid. She was a girl, and a year younger than Diamond, and a witch's daughter. He wished his son would play with boys his own age, his own sort, from the respectable families of Glade. Tuly insisted on calling the witch "the wisewoman," but a witch was a witch and her daughter was no fit companion for Diamond. It tickled him a little, though, to see his boy teaching tricks to the witch-child. "What else can you do, Diamond?" he asked. "Play the flute," Diamond said promptly, and took out of his

pocket the little fife his mother had given him for his twelfth birthday. He put it to his lips, his fingers danced, and he played a sweet, familiar tune from the western coast, "Where My Love Is Going." "Very nice,' said the father. "But anybody can play the fife, you know." Diamond glanced at Rose. The girl turned her head away, looking down. "I learned it really quickly," Diamond said. Golden grunted, unimpressed. "It can do it by itself," Diamond said, and held out the fife away from his lips. His fingers danced on the stops, and the fife played a short jig. It hit several false notes and squealed on the last high note. "I haven't got it right yet," Diamond said, vexed and embarrassed. "Pretty good, pretty good," his father said. "Keep practicing." And he went on. He was not sure what he ought to have said. He did not want to encourage the boy to spend any more time on music, or with this girl; he spent too much already, and neither of them would help him get anywhere in life. But this gift, this undeniable gift t the rock hovering, the unblown fife -- Well, it would be wrong to make too much of it, but probably it should not be discouraged. In Golden's understanding, money was power, but not the only power. There were two others, one equal, one greater. There was birth. When the Lord of the Western Land came to his domain near Glade, Golden was glad to show him fealty. The Lord was born to govern and to keep the peace, as Golden was born to deal with commerce and wealth, each in his place; and each, noble or common, if he served well and honestly, deserved honor and respect. But there were also lesser lords whom Golden could buy and sell, lend to or let beg, men born noble who deserved neither fealty nor honor. Power of birth and power of money were contingent, and must be earned lest they be lost. But beyond the rich and the lordly were those called the Men of Power: the wizards. Their power, though little exercised, was absolute. In their hands lay the fate of the long-kingless kingdom of the Archipelago. If Diamond had been born to that kind of power, if that was his gift, then all Golden's dreams and plans of training him in the business, and having him help in expanding the carting route to a regular trade with South Port, and buying up the chestnut forests above Reche -- all such plans dwindled into trifles. Might Diamond go (as his mother's uncle had gone) to the School of Wizards on Roke Island? Might he (as that uncle had done) gain glory for his family and dominion over lord and commoner, becoming a Mage in the Court of the Lords Regent in the Great Port of Havnor? Golden all but floated up the stairs himself, borne on such visions. But he said nothing to the boy and nothing to the boy's mother. He was a consciously close-mouthed man, distrustful of visions until they could be made acts; and she, though a dutiful, loving wife and mother and housekeeper, already made too much of Diamond's talents and accomplishments.

Also, like all women, she was inclined to babble and gossip, and indiscriminate in her friendships. The girl Rose hung about with Diamond because Tuly encouraged Rose's mother the witch to visit, consulting her every time Diamond had a hangnail, and telling her more than she or anyone ought to know about Golden's household. His business was none of the witch's business. On the other hand, Tangle might be able to tell him if his son in fact showed promise, had a talent for magery...but he flinched away from the thought of asking her, asking a witch's opinion on anything, least of all a judgment on his son. He resolved to wait and watch. Being a patient man with a strong will, he did so for four years, till Diamond was sixteen. A big, well-grown youth, good at games and lessons, he was 'still ruddy-faced and bright-eyed and cheerful. He had taken it hard when his voice changed, the sweet treble going all untuned and hoarse. Golden had hoped that that was the end of his singing, but the boy went on wandering about with itinerant musicians, ballad-singers and such, learning all their trash. That was no life for a merchant's son who was to inherit and manage his father's properties and mills and business, and Golden told him so. "Singing time is over, son," he said. "You must think about being a man." Diamond had been given his truename at the springs of the Amia in the hills above Glade. The wizard Hemlock, who had known his great-uncle the Mage, came up from South Port to name him. And Hemlock was invited to his nameday party the year after, a big party, beer and food for all, and new clothes, a shirt or skirt or shift for every child, which was an old custom in the West of Havnor, and dancing on the village green in the warm autumn evening. Diamond had many friends, all the boys his age in town and all the girls too. The young people danced, and some of them had a bit too much beer, but nobody misbehaved very badly, and it was a merry and memorable night. The next morning Golden told his son again that he must think about being a man. "I have thought some about it," said the boy, in his husky voice. "And?" "Well, I," said Diamond, and stuck. "I'd always counted on your going into the family business," Golden said. His tone was neutral, and Diamond said nothing. "Have you had any ideas of what you want to do?" "Sometimes." "Did you talk at all to Master Hemlock?" Diamond hesitated and said, "No." He looked a question at his father. "I talked to him last night," Golden said. "He said to me that there are certain natural gifts which it's not only difficult but actually wrong, harmful, to suppress." The light had come back into Diamond's dark eyes. "The Master said that such gifts or capacities, untrained, are not only wasted, but may be dangerous. The art must be learned, and practiced, he said." Diamond's face shone. "But, he said, it must be learned and practiced for its own sake." Diamond nodded eagerly. "If it's a real gift, an unusual capacity,

that's even more true. A witch with her love potions can't do much harm, but even a village sorcerer, he said, must take care, for if the art is

used for base ends, it becomes weak and noxious .... Of course, even a

sorcerer gets paid. And wizards, as you know, live with lords, and have what they wish." Diamond was listening intently, frowning a little. "So, to be blunt about it, if you have this gift, Diamond, it's of no use, directly, to our business. It has to be cultivated on its own terms, and kept under control -- learned and mastered. Only then, he said, can your teachers begin to tell you what to do with it, what good it will do you. Or others," he added conscientiously. There was a long pause. "I told him," Golden said, "that I had seen you, with a turn of your hand and a single word, change a wooden carving of a bird into a bird that flew up and sang. Pre seen you make a light glow in thin air. You didn't know I was watching. I've watched and said nothing for a long time. I didn't want to make too much of mere childish play. But I believe you have a gift, perhaps a great gift. When I told Master Hemlock what I'd seen you do, he agreed with me. He said that you may go study with him in South Port for a year, or perhaps longer." "Study with Master Hemlock?" said Diamond, his voice up half an octave. "If you wish." "I, I, I never thought about it. Can I think about it? For a while-- a day?" "Of course," Golden said, pleased with his son's caution. He had thought Diamond might leap at the offer, which would have been natural, perhaps, but painful to the father, the owl who had -- perhaps -hatched out an eagle. For Golden looked on the Art Magic with genuine humility as something quite beyond him -- not a mere toy, such as music or tale-telling, but a

practical business, which his business could never quite equal. And he was,

though he wouldn't have put it that way, afraid of wizards. A bit contemptuous of sorcerers, with their sleights and illusions and gibble-gabble, but afraid of wizards. "Does Mother know?" Diamond asked. "She will when the time comes. But she has no part to play in your decision, Diamond. Women know nothing of these matters and have nothing to do with them. You must make your choice alone, as a man. Do you understand that?" Golden was earnest, seeing his chance to begin to wean the lad from his mother. She as a woman would cling, but he as a man must learn to let go. And Diamond nodded sturdily enough to satisfy his father, though he had a thoughtful look. "Master Hemlock said I, said he thought I had, I might have a, a gift, a talent for--?" Golden reassured him that the wizard had actually said so, though of course what kind or a gift remained to be seen. The boy's modesty was a great relief to him. He had half-consciously dreaded

that Diamond would triumph over him, asserting his power right away -- that mysterious, dangerous, incalculable power against which Golden's wealth and mastery and dignity shrank to impotence. "Thank you, Father," the boy said. Golden embraced him and left, well pleased with him. THEIR MEETING PLACE was in the sallows, the willow thickets down by the Amia as it ran below the smithy. As soon as Rose got there, Diamond said, "He wants me to go study with Master Hemlock! What am I going to do?" "Study with the wizard?" "He thinks I have this huge great talent. For magic." "Who does?" "Father does. He saw some of the stuff we were practicing. But he says Hemlock says I should come study with him because it might be dangerous not to. Oh," and Diamond beat his head with his hands. "But you do have a talent." He groaned and scoured his scalp with his knuckles. He was sitting on the dirt in their old play-place, a kind of bower deep in the willows, where they could hear the stream running over the stones nearby and the clang-clang of the smithy further off. The girl sat down facing him. "Look at all the stuff you can do," she said. "You couldn't do any of it if you didn't have a gift." "A little gift," Diamond said indistinctly. "Enough for tricks." "How do you know that?" Rose was very dark-skinned, with a cloud of crinkled hair, a thin mouth, an intent, serious face. Her feet and legs and hands were bare and dirty, her skirt and jacket disreputable. Her dirty toes and fingers were delicate and elegant, and a necklace of amethysts gleamed under the torn, buttonless jacket. Her mother, Tangle, made a good living by curing and healing, bone-knitting and birth-easing, and selling spells of finding, love-potions, and sleeping-drafts. She could afford to dress herself and her daughter in new clothes, buy shoes, and keep clean, but it didn't occur to her to do so. Nor was housekeeping one of her interests. She and Rose lived mostly on boiled chicken and fried eggs, as she was often paid in poultry. The yard of their two-room house was a wilderness of cats and hens. She liked cats, toads, and jewels. The amethyst necklace had been payment for the safe delivery of a son to Golden's head forester. Tangle herself wore armfuls of bracelets and bangles that flashed and crashed when she flicked out an impatient spell. At times she wore a kitten on her shoulder. She was not an attentive mother. Rose had demanded, at seven years old, "Why did you have me if you didn't want me?" "How can you deliver babies properly if you haven't had one?" said her mother. "So I was practice," Rose snarled. "Everything is practice," Tangle said. She was never ill-natured. She seldom thought to do anything much for her daughter, but never hurt her, never scolded her, and gave her whatever she asked for, dinner, a toad of her own, the amethyst necklace, lessons in witchcraft. She would have provided new clothes if Rose had asked for them, but she never did. Rose had

looked after herself from an early age; and this was one of the reasons Diamond loved her. With her, he knew what freedom was. Without her, he could attain it only when he was hearing and singing and playing music. "I do have a gift," he said now, rubbing his temples and pulling his hair. "Stop destroying your head," Rose told him. "I know Tarry thinks I do." "Of course you do! What does it matter what Tarry thinks? You already play the harp about nine times better than he ever did." This was another of the reasons Diamond loved her. "Are there any wizard musicians?" he asked, looking up. She pondered. "I don't know." "I don't either. Morred and Elfarran sang to each other, and he was a mage. I think there's a Master Chanter on Roke, that teaches the lays and the histories. But I never heard of a wizard being a musician." "I don't see why one couldn't be." She never saw why something could not be. Another reason he loved her. "It always seemed to me they're sort of alike," he said, "magic and music. Spells and tunes. For one thing, you have to get them just exactly right." "Practice," Rose said, rather sourly. "I know." She flicked a pebble at Diamond. It turned into a butterfly in midair. He flicked a butterfly back at her, and the two flitted and flickered a moment before they fell back to earth as pebbles. Diamond and Rose had worked out several such variations on the old stone-hopping trick. "You ought to go, Di," she said. "Just to find out." "I know." "What if you got to be a wizard! Oh! Think of the stuff you could teach me! Shapechanging B We could be anything. Horses! Bears!" "Moles," Diamond said. "Honestly, I feel like hiding underground. I always thought Father was going to make me learn all his kind of stuff, after I got my name. But all this year he's kept sort of holding off. I guess he had this in mind all along. But what if I go down there and I'm not any better at being a wizard than I am at bookkeeping? Why can't I do what I know I can do?" "Well, why can't you do it all? The magic and the music, anyhow? You can always hire a bookkeeper." When she laughed, her thin face got bright, her thin mouth got wide, and her eyes disappeared. "Oh, Darkrose," Diamond said, "I love you." "Of course you do. You'd better. I'll witch you if you don't." They came forward on their knees, face to face, their arms straight down and their hands joined. They kissed each other all over their faces. To Rose's lips Diamond's face was smooth and full as a plum, with just a hint of prickliness above the lip and jawline, where he had taken to shaving recently. To Diamond's lips Rose's face was soft as silk, with just a hint of grittiness on one cheek, which she had rubbed with a dirty hand. They moved a little closer so that their breasts and bellies touched, though their hands stayed down by their sides. They went on kissing. "Darkrose," he breathed in her ear, his secret name for her. She said nothing, but breathed very warm in his ear, and he moaned. His hands

clenched hers. He drew back a little. She drew back. They sat back on their ankles. "Oh Di," she said, "it will be awful when you go." "I won't go," he said. "Anywhere. Ever." BUT OF COURSE he went down to Havnor South Port, in one of his father's carts driven by one of his father's carters, along with Master Hemlock. As a rule, people do what wizards advise them to do. And it is no small honor to be invited by a wizard to be his student or apprentice. Hemlock, who had won his staff on Roke, was used to having boys come to him begging to be tested and, if they had the gift for it, taught. He was a little curious about this boy whose cheerful good manners hid some reluctance or self-doubt. It was the father's idea, not the boy's, that he was gifted. That was unusual, though perhaps not so unusual among the wealthy as among common folk. At any rate he came with a very good prenticing fee paid beforehand in gold and ivory. If he had the makings of a wizard Hemlock would train him, and if he had, as Hemlock suspected, a mere childish flair, then he'd be sent home with what remained of his fee. Hemlock was an honest, upright, humorless, scholarly wizard with little interest in feelings or ideas. His gift was for names. "The art begins and ends in naming," he said, which indeed is true, although there may be a good deal between the beginning and the end. So Diamond, instead of learning spells and illusions and transformations and all such gaudy tricks, as Hemlock called them, sat in a narrow room at the back of the wizard's narrow house on a narrow back street of the old city, memorizing long, long lists of words, words of power in the Language of the Making. Plants and parts of plants and animals and parts of animals and islands and parts of islands, parts of ships, parts of the human body. The words never made sense, never made sentences, only lists. Long, long lists. His mind wandered. "Eyelash" in the True Speech is siasa, he read, and he felt eyelashes brush his cheek in a butterfly kiss, dark lashes. He looked up startled and did not know what had touched him.

Later when he tried to repeat the word, he stood dumb. "Memory, memory," Hemlock said. "Talent's no good without memory!" He was not harsh, but he was unyielding. Diamond had no idea what opinion Hemlock had of him, and guessed it to be pretty low. The wizard sometimes had him come with him to his work, mostly laying spells of safety on ships and houses, purifying wells, and sitting on the councils of the city, seldom speaking but always listening. Another wizard, not Roke-trained but with the healer's gift, looked after the sick and dying of South Port. Hemlock was glad to let him do so. His own pleasure was in studying and, as far as Diamond could see, doing no magic at all. "Keep the Equilibrium, it's all in that," Hemlock said, and, "Knowledge, order, and control." Those words he said so often that they made a tune in Diamond's head and sang themselves over and

over: knowledge, or-der,

and contro-----1.... When Diamond put the lists of names to tunes he made up,

he learned them much faster; but then the tune would come as part of the name, and he would sing out so clearly-- for his voice had re-established itself as a strong, dark tenor -- that Hemlock winced. Hemlock's was a very silent house. Mostly the pupil was supposed to be with the Master, or studying the lists of names in the room where the lorebooks and wordbooks were, or asleep. Hemlock was a stickler for early abed and early afoot. But now and then Diamond had an hour or two free. He always went down to the docks and sat on a pierside or a waterstair and thought about Darkrose. As soon as he was out of the house and away from Master Hemlock, he began to think about Darkrose, and went on thinking about her and very little else. It surprised him a little. He thought he ought to be homesick, to think about his mother. He did think about his mother quite often, and often was homesick, lying on his cot in his bare and narrow little room after a scanty supper of cold pea-porridge -- for this wizard, at least, did not live in such luxury as Golden had imagined. Diamond never thought about Darkrose, nights. He thought of his mother, or of sunny rooms and hot food, or a tune would come into his head and he would practice it mentally on the harp in his mind, and so drift off to sleep. Darkrose would come to his mind only when he was down at the docks, staring out at the water of the harbor, the piers, the fishing boats, only when he was outdoors and away from Hemlock and his house. So he cherished his free hours as if they were actual meetings with her. He had always loved her, but had not understood that he loved her beyond anyone and anything. When he was with her, even when he was down on the docks thinking of her, he was alive. He never felt entirely alive in Master Hemlock's house and presence. He felt a little dead. Not dead, but a little dead. A few times, sitting on the waterstairs, the dirty harbor water sloshing at the next step down, the yells of gulls and dockworkers wreathing the air with a thin, ungainly music, he shut his eyes and saw his love so clear, so close, that he reached out his hand to touch her. If he reached out his hand in his mind only, as when he played the mental harp, then indeed he touched her. He felt her hand in his, and her cheek, warm-cool, silken-gritty, lay against his mouth. In his mind he spoke to her, and in his

mind she answered, her voice, her husky voice saying his name, "Diamond ....

" But as he went back up the streets of South Port he lost her. He swore to keep her with him, to think of her, to think of her that night, but she faded away. By the time he opened the door of Master Hemlock's house he was reciting lists of names, or wondering what

would be for dinner, for he was hungry most of the time. Not till he could take an hour and run back down to the docks could he think of her. So he came to feel that those hours were true meetings with her, and he lived for them, without knowing what he lived for until his feet were on the cobbles, and his eyes on the harbor and the far line of the sea. Then he remembered what was worth remembering. The winter passed by, and the cold early spring, and with the warm late spring came a letter from his mother, brought by a carter. Diamond read it and took it to Master Hemlock, saying, "My mother wonders if I might spend a month at home this summer." "Probably not," the wizard said, and then, appearing to notice Diamond, put down his pen and said, "Young man, I must ask you if you wish to continue studying with me." Diamond had no idea what to say. The idea of its being up to him had not occurred to him. "Do you think I ought to?" he asked at last. "Probably not," the wizard said. Diamond expected to feel relieved, released, but found he felt rejected, ashamed. "I'm sorry," he said, with enough dignity that Hemlock glanced up at him. "You could go to Roke," the wizard said. "To Roke?" The boy's drop-jawed stare irritated Hemlock, though he knew it shouldn't. Wizards are used to overweening confidence in the young of their kind. They expect modesty to come later, if at all. "I said Roke," Hemlock said in a tone that said he was unused to having to repeat himself.

And then, because this boy, this soft-headed, spoiled, moony boy had endeared himself to Hemlock by his uncomplaining patience, he took pity on him and said, "You should either go to Roke or find a wizard to teach you what you need. Of course you need what I can teach you. You need the names. The art begins and ends in naming. But that's not your gift. You have a poor memory for words. You must train it diligently. However, it's clear that you do have capacities, and that they need cultivation and discipline, which another man can give you better than I can." So does modesty breed modesty, sometimes, even in unlikely places. "If you were to go to Roke, I'd send a letter with you drawing you to the particular attention of the Master Summoner." "Ah," said Diamond, floored. The Summoner's art is perhaps the most arcane and dangerous of all the arts of magic. "Perhaps I am wrong," said Hemlock in his dry, flat voice. "Your gift may be for Pattern. Or perhaps it's an ordinary gift for shaping and transformation. I'm not certain." "But you are -- I do actually --" "Oh yes. You are uncommonly slow, young man, to recognize your own capacities." It was spoken harshly, and Diamond stiffened up a bit. "I thought my gift was for music," he said. Hemlock dismissed that with a flick of his hand. "I am talking of the True Art," he said. "Now I will be frank with you. I advise you to write your parents -- I shall write them too -- informing them of your decision to go to the School on

Roke, if that is what you decide; or to the Great Port, if the Mage Restive will take you on, as I think he will, with my recommendation. But I advise against visiting home. The entanglement of family, friends, and so on is precisely what you need to be free of. Now, and henceforth." "Do wizards have no family?" Hemlock was glad to see a bit of fire in the boy. "They are one another's family," he said. "And no friends?" "They may be friends. Did I say it was an easy life?" A pause. Hemlock looked directly at Diamond. "There was a girl," he said. Diamond met his gaze for a moment, looked down, and said nothing. "Your father told me. A witch's daughter, a childhood playmate. He believed that you had taught her spells." "She taught me." Hemlock nodded. "That is quite understandable, among children. And quite impossible now. Do you understand that?" "No," Diamond said. "Sit down," said Hemlock. After a moment Diamond took the stiff, high-backed chair facing him. "I can protect you here, and have done so. On Roke, of course, you'll be perfectly safe. The very walls, there...But if you go home, you must be willing to protect yourself. It's a difficult thing for a young man, very difficult -a test of a will that has not yet been steeled, a mind that has not yet seen its true goal. I very strongly advise that you not take that risk. Write your parents, and go to the Great Port, or to Roke. Half your year's fee, which I'll return to you, will see to your first expenses." Diamond sat upright and still. He had been getting some of his father's height and girth lately, and looked very much a man, though a very young one. "What did you mean, Master Hemlock, in saying that you had protected me here?" "Simply as I protect myself," the wizard said; and after a moment, testily, "The bargain, boy. The power we give for our power. The lesser state of being we forego. Surely you know that every true man of power is celibate." There was a pause, and Diamond said, "So you saw to it...that I..." "Of course. It was my responsibility as your teacher." Diamond nodded. He said, "Thank you." Presently he stood up. "Excuse me, Master," he said. "I have to think." "Where are you going?" "Down to the waterfront." "Better stay here." "I can't think, here." Hemlock might have known then what he was up against; but having told the boy he would not be his master any longer, he could not in conscience command him. "You have a true gift, Essiri," he said, using the name he had given the boy in the springs of the Amia, a word that in the Old Speech means Willow. "I don't entirely understand it. I think you don't understand it at all. Take care! To misuse a gift, or to refuse to use it, may cause great loss, great harm." Diamond nodded, suffering, contrite, unrebellious, unmovable. "Go on," the wizard said, and he went. Later he knew he should never have let the boy leave the house. He had underestimated Diamond's willpower, or the strength of the spell the girl had laid on him. Their conversation was in the

morning; Hemlock went back to the ancient cantrip he was annotating; it was not till supper time that he thought about his pupil, and not until he had eaten supper alone that he admitted that Diamond had run away. Hemlock was 10th to practice any of the lesser arts of magic. He did not put out a finding spell, as any sorcerer might have done. Nor did he call to Diamond in any way. He was angry; perhaps he was hurt. He had thought well of the boy, and offered to write the Summoner about him, and then at the first test of character Diamond had broken. "Glass," the wizard muttered. At least this weakness proved he was not dangerous. Some talents were best not left to run wild, but there was no harm in this fellow, no malice. No ambition. "No spine," said Hemlock to the silence . of the house. "Let him crawl home to his mother." Still it rankled him that Diamond had let him down flat, without a word of thanks or apology. So much for good manners, he thought. As she blew out the lamp and got into bed, the witch's daughter heard an owl calling, the little, liquid hu-hu-hu-hu that made people call them laughing owls. She heard it with a mournful heart. That had been their signal, summer nights, when they sneaked out to meet in the willow grove, down on the banks of the Amia, when everybody else was sleeping. She would not think of him at night. Back in the winter she had sent to him night after night. She had learned her mother's spell of sending, and knew that it was a true spell. She had sent him her touch, her voice saying his name, again and again. She had met a wall of air and silence. She touched nothing. He would not hear. Once or twice, all of a sudden, in the daytime, there had been a moment when she had known him close in mind and could touch him if she reached out. But at night she knew only his blank absence, his refusal of her. She had stopped trying to reach him, months ago, but her heart was still very sore. "Hu-hu-hu," said the owl, under her window, and then it said, "Darkrose!" Startled from her misery, she leaped out of bed and opened the shutters. "Come on out," whispered Diamond, a shadow in the

starlight. "Mother's not home. Come in!" She met him at the door. They held each other tight, hard, silent for a long time. To Diamond it was as if he held his future, his own life, his whole life, in his arms. At last she moved, and kissed his cheek, and whispered, "I missed you, I missed you, I missed you. How long can you stay?" "As long as I like." She kept his hand and led him in. He was always a little reluctant to enter the witch's house, a pungent, disorderly place thick with the mysteries of women and witchcraft, very different from his own clean comfortable home, even more different from the cold austerity of the wizard's house. He shivered like a horse as he stood there, too tall for the herb-festooned rafters. He was very highly strung, and worn out, having walked forty miles in sixteen hours without food. "Where's

your mother?" he asked in a whisper. "Sitting with old Ferny. She died this afternoon, Mother will be there all night. But how did you get

here?" "Walked." "The wizard let you visit home?" "I ran away." "Ran away! Why?' "To keep you." He looked at her, that vivid, fierce, dark face in its rough cloud of hair. She wore only her shift, and he saw the infinitely delicate, tender rise of her breasts. He drew her to him again, but though she hugged him she drew away again, frowning. "Keep me?" she repeated. "You didn't seem to worry about losing me all winter. What made you come back now?" "He wanted me to go to Roke." "To Roke?" She stared. "To Roke, Di?

Then you really do have the gift --you could be a sorcerer?" To find her on Hemlock's side was a blow. "Sorcerers are nothing to him. He means I could be a wizard. Do magery. Not just witchcraft." "Oh I see," Rose said after a

moment. "But I don't see why you ran away." They had let go of each other's hands. "Don't you understand?" he said, exasperated with her for not understanding, because he had not understood. "A wizard can't have anything to do with women. With witches. With all that." "Oh, I know. It's beneath them." "It's not just beneath them --" "Oh, but it is. I'll bet you had to unlearn every spell I taught you. Didn't you?" "It isn't the same kind of thing." "No. It isn't the High Art. It isn't the True Speech. A wizard mustn't soil his lips with common words. 'Weak as women's magic, wicked as women's magic,' you think I don't know what they say? So, why did you come back here?" "To see you!" "What for?" "What do you think?" "You never sent to me, you never let me send to you, all the time you were gone. I was just supposed to wait until you got tired of playing wizard. Well, I got tired of waiting." Her voice was nearly inaudible, a rough whisper. "Somebody's been coming around," he said, incredulous that she could turn against him. "Who's been after you?" "None of your business if there is! You go off, you turn your back on me. Wizards can't have anything to do with what I do, what my mother does. Well, I don't want anything to do with what you do, either, ever. So go!" Starving hungry, frustrated, misunderstood, Diamond reached out to hold her again, to make her body understand his body, repeating that first, deep embrace that had held all the years of their lives in it. He found himself standing two feet back, his hands stinging and his ears ringing and his eyes dazzled. Thc lightning was in Rose's eyes, and her hands sparked as she clenched them. "Never do that again," she whispered. "Never fear,"

Diamond said, turned on his heel, and strode out. A string of dried sage caught on his head and trailed after him. HE SPENT THE NIGHT in their old place in the sallows. Maybe he hoped she would come, but she did not come, and he soon slept in sheer weariness. He woke in the first, cold light. He sat up and thought. He looked at life

in that cold light. It was a different matter from what he had believed it. He went down to the stream in which he had been named. He drank, washed his hands and face, made himself look as decent as he could, and went up through the town to the fine house at the high end, his father's house. After the first outcries and embraces, the servants and his mother sat him right down to breakfast. So it was with warm food in his belly and a certain chill courage in his heart that he faced his father, who had been out before breakfast seeing off a string of timber-carts to the Great Port. "Well, son!" They touched cheeks. "So Master Hemlock gave you a vacation?" "No, sir. I left." Golden stared, then filled his plate and sat down. "Left," he said. "Yes, sir. I decided that I don't want to be a wizard." "Hmf," said Golden, chewing. "Left of your own accord? Entirely?

With the Master's permission?" "Of my own accord entirely, without his permission." Golden chewed very slowly, his eyes on the table. Diamond had seen his father look like this when a forester reported an infestation in the chestnut groves, and when he found a mule-dealer had cheated him. "He wanted me to go to the College on Roke to study with the Master Summoner. He was going to send me there. I decided not to go." After a while Golden asked, still looking at the table, "Why?" "It isn't the life I want." Another pause. Golden glanced over at his wife, who stood by the window listening in silence. Then he looked at his son. Slowly the mixture of anger, disappointment, confusion, and respect on his face gave way to something simpler, a look of complicity, very nearly a wink. "I see," he said. "And what did you decide you want?" A pause. "This," Diamond said. His voice was level. He looked neither at his father nor his mother. "Hah!" said Golden. "Well! I will say I'm glad of it, son." He ate a small porkpie in one mouthful. "Being a wizard, going to Roke, all that, it never seemed real, not exactly. And with you off there, I didn't know what all this was for, to tell you the truth. All my business. If you're here, it adds up, you see. It adds up. Well! But listen here, did you just run off from the wizard? Did he know you were going?" "No. I'll write him," Diamond said, in his new, level voice. "He won't be angry? They say wizards have short tempers. Full of pride." "He's angry," Diamond said, "but he won't do anything." So it

proved. Indeed, to Golden's amazement, Master Hemlock sent back a scrupulous two-fifths of the prenticing-fee. With the packet, which was delivered by one of Golden's carters who had taken a load of spars down to South Port, was a note for Diamond. It said, "True art requires a single heart." The direction on the outside was the Hardic rune for willow. The note was signed with Hemlock's rune, which had two meanings: the hemlock tree, and suffering. Diamond sat in his own sunny room upstairs, on his comfortable bed, hearing his mother

singing as she went about the house. He held the wizard's letter and reread the message and the two runes many times. The cold and sluggish mind that had been born in him that morning down in the sallows accepted the lesson. No magic. Never again. He had never given his heart to it. It had been a game to him, a game to play with Darkrose. Even the names of the True Speech that he had learned in the wizard's house, though he knew the beauty and the power that lay in them, he could let go, let slip, forget. That was not his language. He could speak his language only with her. And he had lost her, let her go. The double heart has no true speech. From now on he could talk only the language of duty: the getting and the spending, the outlay and the income, the profit and the loss. And beyond that, nothing. There had been illusions, little spells, pebbles that turned to butterflies, wooden birds that flew on living wings for a minute or two. There had never been a choice, really. There was only one way for him to go. GOLDEN WAS immensely happy and quite unconscious of it. "Old man's got his jewel back," said the carter to the forester. "Sweet as new butter, he is." Golden, unaware of being sweet, thought only how sweet life was. He had bought the Reche grove, at a very stiff price to be sure, but at least old Lowbough of Easthill hadn't got it, and now he and Diamond could develop it as it ought to be developed. In among the chestnuts there were a lot of pines, which could be felled and sold for masts and spars and small lumber, and replanted with chestnut seedlings.

It would in time be a pure stand like the Big Grove, the heart of his chestnut kingdom. In time, of course. Oak and chestnut don't shoot up overnight like alder and willow. But there was time. There was time, now. The boy was barely seventeen, and he himself just forty-five. In his prime. He had been feeling old, but that was nonsense. He was in his prime. The oldest trees, past bearing, ought to come out with the pines. Some good wood for furniture could be salvaged from them. "Well, well, well," he said to his wife, frequently, "all rosy again, eh? Got the apple of your eye back home, eh? No more moping, eh?" And Tuly smiled and stroked his hand. Once instead of smiling and agreeing, she said, "It's lovely to have him back, but" and Golden stopped hearing. Mothers were born to worry about their children, and women were born never to be content. There was no reason why he should listen to the litany of anxieties by which Tuly hauled herself through life. Of course she thought a merchant's life wasn't good enough for the boy. She'd have thought being King in Havnor wasn't good enough for him. "When he gets himself a girl," Golden said, in answer to whatever it was she had been saying, "he'll be all squared away. Living with the wizards, you know, the way they are, it set him back a bit. Don't worry about Diamond. He'll know what he wants

when he sees it!" "I hope so," said Tuly. "At least he's not seeing the witch's girl," said Golden. "That's done with." Later on it occurred to him that neither was his wife seeing the witch anymore. For years they'd been thick as thieves, against all his warnings, and now Tangle was never anywhere near the house. Women's friendships never lasted. He teased her about it. Finding her strewing pennyroyal and millersbane in the chests and clothes-presses against an infestation of moths, he said, "Seems like you'd have your friend the wise woman up to hex 'em away. Or aren't you friends anymore?" "No," his wife said in her soft, level voice, "we aren't." "And a good thing too!" Golden said roundly. "What's become of that daughter of hers, then? Went off with a juggler, I heard?" "A musician," Tuly said. "Last summer." "A nameday party," said Golden. "Time for a bit of play, a bit of music and dancing, boy. Nineteen years old. Celebrate it!" "I'll be going to Easthill with Sul's mules." "No, no, no. Sul can handle it. Stay home and have your party. You've been working hard. We'll hire a band. Who's the best in the country? Tarry and his lot?" "Father, I don't want a party," Diamond said and stood up, shivering his muscles like a horse. He was bigger than Golden now, and when he moved abruptly it was startling. "I'11 go to Easthill," he said, and left the room. "What's that all about?" Golden said to his wife, a rhetorical question. She looked at him and said nothing, a non-rhetorical answer. After Golden had gone out, she found her son in the counting-room going through ledgers. She looked at the pages. Long, long lists of names and numbers, debts and credits, profits and losses. "Di," she said, and he looked up. His face was still round and a bit peachy, though the bones were heavier and the eyes were melancholy. "I didn't mean to hurt Father's feelings," he said. "If he wants a party, he'll have it," she said. Their voices were alike, being in the higher register but dark-toned, and held to an even quietness, contained, restrained. She perched on a stool beside his at the high desk. "I can't," he said, and stopped, and went on, "I really don't want to have any dancing." "He's matchmaking," Tuly said, dry, fond. "I don't care about that." "I know you don't." "The problem is..." "The problem is the music," his mother said at last. He nodded. "My son, there is no reason," she said, suddenly passionate, "there is no reason why you should give up everything you love!" He took her hand and kissed it as they sat side by side. "Things don't mix," he said. "They ought to, but they don't. I found that out. When I left the wizard, I thought I could be everything. You know -do magic, play music, be Father's son, love Rose .... It doesn't work that

way. Things don't mix." "They do, they do," Tuly said. "Everything is hooked together, tangled up!" "Maybe things are, for women. But I...I can't be double-hearted." "Doublehearted? You? You gave up

wizardry because you knew that if you didn't, you'd betray it." He took the word with a visible shock, but did not deny it. "But why did you give up music?" "I have to have a single heart. I can't play the harp while I'm bargaining with a mule-breeder.

I can't sing ballads while I'm figuring what we have to pay the pickers to keep 'em from hiring out to Lowbough!" His voice shook a little now, a vibrato, and his eyes were not sad, but angry. "So you put a spell on yourself," she said, "just as that wizard put one on you. A spell to keep you safe. To keep you with the mule-breeders, and the nut-pickers, and these." She struck the ledger full of lists of names and figures, a flicking, dismissive tap. "A spell of silence," she said. After a long time the young man said, "What else can I do?" "I don't know, my dear. I do want you to be safe. I do love to see your father happy and proud of you. But I can't bear to see you unhappy, without pride! I don't know. Maybe you're right. Maybe for a man it's only one thing ever. But I miss hearing you sing." She was in tears. They hugged, and she stroked his thick, shining hair and apologized for being cruel, and he hugged her again and said she was the kindest mother in the world, and so she went off. But as she left she turned back a moment and said, "Let him have the party, Di. Let yourself have it." "I will," he said, to comfort her. Golden ordered the beer and food and fireworks, but Diamond saw to hiring the musicians. "Of course I'll bring my band," Tarry said, "fat chance I'd miss it! You'll have every tootler in the west of the world here for one of your dad's parties." "You can tell 'em you're the band that's getting paid." "Oh, they'll come for the glory," said the harper, a lean, long-jawed, wall-eyed fellow of forty. "Maybe you'll have a go with us yourself, then? You had a hand for it, before you took to making money. And the voice not bad, if you'd worked on it." "I doubt it," Diamond said. "That girl you liked, witch's Rose, she's tuning about with Labby, I hear. No doubt they'll come by." "I'll see you then," said Diamond, looking big and handsome and indifferent, and walked off. "Too high and mighty these days to stop and talk," said Tarry, "though I taught him all he knows of harping. But what's that to a rich man ?" Tarry's malice had left his nerves raw, and the thought of the party weighed on him till he lost his appetite. He thought hopefully for a while that he was sick and could miss the party. But the day came, and he was there. Not so evidently, so eminently, so flamboyantly there as his father, but present, smiling, dancing. All his childhood friends were there too, half of them married by now to the other half, it seemed, but there was still plenty of flirting going on, and several pretty girls were always near him. He drank a good deal of Gadge Brewer's excellent beer, and found he could endure the music if he was dancing to it and talking and laughing while he danced. So he danced with all the pretty girls in

turn, and then again with whichever one turned up again, which all of them did. It was Golden's grandest party yet, with a dancing floor built on the town green down the way from Golden's house, and a tent for the old folks to eat and drink and gossip in, and new clothes for the children, and jugglers and puppeteers, some of them hired and some of them coming by to pick up whatever they could in the way of coppers and free beer. Any festivity drew itinerant entertainers and musicians it was their living, and though uninvited they were welcomed.

A tale-singer with a droning voice and a droning bagpipe was singing The Deed o[the Dragonlord to a group of people under the big oak on the hilltop.

When Tarry's band of harp, fife, viol, and drum took time off for a breather and a swig, a new group hopped up onto the dance floor. "Hey, there's Labby's band!" cried the pretty girl nearest Diamond. "Come on, they're the best!" Labby, a light-skinned, flashy-looking fellow, played the double-reed woodhorn. With him were a violist, a tabor-player, and Rose, who played fife. Their first tune was a stampy, fast and brilliant, too fast for some of the dancers. Diamond and his partner stayed in, and people cheered and clapped them when they finished the dance, sweating and panting. "Beer!" Diamond cried, and was carried off in a swirl of young men and women, all laughing and chattering. He heard behind him the next tune start up, the viol alone, strong and sad as a tenor voice: "Where My Love Is Going." He drank a mug of beer down in one draft, and the girls with him watched the muscles in his strong throat as he swallowed, and they laughed and chattered, and he shivered all over like a cart horse stung by flies. He said, "Oh! I can't -- !" He bolted off into the dusk beyond the lanterns hanging around the brewer's booth. "Where's he going?" said one, and another, "He'll be back," and they laughed and chattered. The tune ended. "Darkrose," he said, behind her in the dark. She turned her head and looked at him. Their heads were on a level, she sitting crosslegged up on the dance platform, he kneeling on the grass. "Come to the sallows," he said. She said nothing. Labby, glancing at her, set his woodhorn to his lips. The drummer struck a triple beat on his tabor, and they were off into a sailor's jig. When she looked around again Diamond was gone. Tarry came back with his band in an hour or so, ungrateful for the respite and much the worse for beer. He interrupted the tune and the dancing, telling Labby loudly to clear out. "Ah, pick your nose, harp-picker," Labby said, and Tarry took offense, and people took sides, and while the dispute was at its brief height, Rose put her fife in her pocket and slipped away. Away from the lanterns of the party it was dark, but she knew the way in the dark. He was there. The willows had grown, these two years. There

was only a little space to sit among the green shoots and the long, falling leaves. The music started up, distant, blurred by wind and the murmur of the

river running. "What did you want, Diamond?" "To talk." They were only voices and shadows to each other. "So," she said. "I wanted to ask you to go away with me," he said. "When?" "Then. When we quarreled. I said it all wrong. I thought .... "A long pause. "I thought I could go on running away. With you. And play music. Make a living. Together. I meant to say that." "You didn't say it." "I know. I said everything wrong. I did everything wrong. I betrayed everything. The magic. And the music. And you." "I'm all right," she said. "Are you?" "I'm not really good on the fife, but I'm good enough. What you didn't teach me, I can fill in with a spell, if I have to. And the band, they're all right. Labby isn't as bad as he looks. Nobody fools with me. We make a pretty good living. Winters, I go stay with Mother and help her out. So I'm all right. What about you, Di?" "All wrong." She started to say something, and did not say it. "I guess we were children," he said.

"Now...." "What's changed?" "I made the wrong choice." "Once?" she said.

"Or twice?" "Twice." "Third time's the charm." Neither spoke for a while. She could just make out the bulk of him in the leafy shadows. "You're bigger than you were," she said. "Can you still make a light, Di? I want to see you." He shook his head. "That was the one thing you could do that I never could. And you never could teach me." "I didn't know what I was doing," he said. "Sometimes it worked, sometimes it didn't." "And the wizard in South Port didn't teach you how to make it work?" "He only taught me names." "Why can't you do it now?" "I gave it up, Darkrose. I had to either do it and nothing else, or not do it. You have to have a single heart." "I don't see why," she said. "My mother can cure a fever and ease a childbirth and find a lost ring, maybe that's nothing compared to what the wizards and the dragonlords can do, but it's not nothing, all the same. And she didn't give up anything for it. Having me didn't stop her. She had me so that she could learn how to do it! Just because I learned how to play music from you, did I have to give up saying spells? I can bring a fever down now too. Why should you have to stop doing one thing so you can do the other?" "My father," he began, and stopped, and gave a kind of laugh. "They don't go together," he said. "The money and the music." "The father and the witchgirl," said Darkrose. Again there was silence between them. The leaves of the willows stirred. "Would you come back to me?" he said. "Would you go with me, live with me, marry me, Darkrose?" "Not in your father's house,

Di." "Anywhere. Run away." "But you can't have me without the music." "Or the music without you." "I would," she said. "Does Labby

want a harper?" She hesitated; she laughed. "If he wants a fife-player," she said. "I haven't practiced ever since I left, Darkrose," he said. "But the music was always in my head, and you .... "She reached out her hands to him. They knelt facing, the willow-leaves moving across their hair. They kissed each other, timidly at first. IN THE YEARS after Diamond left home, Golden made more money than he had ever done before. All his deals were profitable.

It was as if good fortune stuck to him and he could not shake it off. He grew immensely wealthy. He did not forgive his son. It would have made a happy ending, but he would not have it. To leave so, without a word, on his nameday night, to go off with the witchgirl, leaving all the honest work undone, to be a vagrant musician, a harper twanging and singing and grinning for pennies -there was nothing but shame and pain and anger in it for Golden. So he had his tragedy. Tuly shared it with him for a long time, since she could see her son only by lying to her husband, which she found hard to do. She wept to think of Diamond hungry, sleeping hard. Cold nights of autumn were a misery to her. But as time went on and she heard him spoken of as Diamond the sweet singer of the West of Havnor, Diamond who had harped and sung to the great lords in the Tower of the Sword, her heart grew lighter. And once, when Golden was down 'at South Port, she and Tangle took a donkey cart and drove over to Easthill, where they heard Diamond sing the Lay of the Lost Queen, while Rose sat with them, and Little Tuly sat on Tuly's knee. And if not a happy ending, that was a true joy, which may be enough to ask for, after all.

URSULA K. Le GUIN OLDERS The moon slips and shines in the wrinkled mirror before the prow, and from the northern sky the Bright Companions shoot glancing arrows of light along the water. In the stern of the boat the polesman stands in the watchful solemnity of his task. His movements as he poles and steers the boat are slow, certain, august. The long, low channelboat slides on the black water as silently as the reflection it pursues. A few dark figures huddle in it. One dark figure lies full length on the half deck, arms at his sides, closed eyes unseeing that other moon slipping and shining through wisps of fog in the luminous blue night sky. The Husbandman of Sandry is coming home from war. They had been waiting for him on Sandry Island ever since last spring, when he went with seven men, following the messengers who came to raise the Queen's army. In midsummer Four of the men of Sandry brought back the news that he was wounded and was lying in the care of the Queen's own physician. They told of his great valor in battle, and told of their own prowess too, and how they had won the war. Since then there had been no news. With him now in the channelboat were the three companions who had stayed with

him, and a physician sent by the Queen, an, assistant to her own doctor. This man, an active, slender person in his forties, cramped by the long night's travel, was quick to leap ashore when the boat slid silently up along the stone quay of Sandry Farm. While the boatmen and the others busied themselves making the boat fast and lifting the stretcher and its burden up from the boat to the quay, the doctor went on up to the house. Approaching the island, as the sky imperceptibly lightened from night-blue to colorless pallor, he had seen the spires of windmills, the crowns of trees, and the roofs of the house, all in black silhouette, standing very high after the miles of endlessly level reedbeds and water channels. "Hello, the people!" he called out as he entered the courtyard. "Wake up! Sandry has come home!" The kitchen was astir already. Lights sprang up elsewhere in the big house.

The doctor heard voices, doors. A stableboy came vaulting out of the loft where he had slept, a dog barked and barked its tardy warning, people began to come out of the house door. As the stretcher was borne into the courtyard, the Farmwife came hurrying out, wrapped in a green cloak that hid her night dress, her hair loose, her feet bare on the stones. She ran to the stretcher as they set it down. "Farre, Farre," she said, kneeling, bending over the still figure. No one spoke or moved in that moment. "He is dead," she said in a whisper, drawing back. "He is alive," the doctor said. And the oldest of the litterbearers, Pask the saddler, said in his rumbling bass, "He lives, Makalidem. But the wound was deep." The doctor looked with pity and respect at the Farmwife, at her bare feet and her clear, bewildered eyes. "Dema," he said, "let us bring him in to the warmth." "Yes, yes," she said, rising and running ahead to prepare. When the stretcher bearers came out again, half the people of Sandry were in the courtyard waiting to hear their news. Most of all they looked to old Pask when he came out, and he looked at them all. He was a big, slow man, girthed like an oak, with a stiff face set in deep lines. "Will he live?" a woman ventured. Pask continued looking them all over until he chose to speak. "We'll plant him," he said. "Ah, ah!" the woman cried, and a groan and sigh went among them all. "And our grandchildren's children will know his name," said Dyadi, Pask's wife, bossoming through the crowd to her husband. "Hello, old man." "Hello, old woman," Pask said. They eyed each other from an equal height. "Still walking, are you?" she said. "How else get back where I belong?" Pask said. His mouth was too set in a straight line to smile, but his eyes glinted a little. "Took your time doing it. Come on, old man. You must be perishing." They strode off side by side toward the lane that led to the saddlery and paddocks. The courtyard buzzed on, all in low-voiced groups around the other two returned men, getting and giving the news of the wars, the city, the marsh isles, the farm.

Indoors, in the beautiful high shadowy room where Farre now lay in the bed still warm from his wife's sleep, the physician stood by the bedside, as grave, intent, careful as the polesman had stood in the stern of the channelboat. He watched the wounded man, his fingers on the pulse. The room was perfectly still. The woman stood at the foot of the bed, and presently he turned to her and gave a quiet nod that said, Very well, as well as can be expected. "He seems scarcely to breathe," she whispered. Her eyes looked large in her face knotted and clenched with anxiety. "He's breathing," the escort assured her. "Slow and deep. Dema, my name is Hamid, assistant to the Queen's physician, Dr. Saker. Her majesty and the Doctor, who had your husband in his care, desired me to come with him and stay here as long as I am needed, to give what care I can. Her majesty charged me to tell you that she is grateful for his sacrifice, that she honors his courage in her service. She will do what may be done to prove that gratitude and to show that honor. And still she bade me tell you that whatever may be done will fall short of his due." "Thank you," said the Farmwife, perhaps only partly understanding, gazing only at the set, still face on the pillow. She was trembling a little. "You're cold, dema," Hamid said gently and respectfully. "You should get dressed." "Is he warm enough? Was he chilled, in the boat? I can have the fire laid-- " "No. He's warm enough. It's you I speak of, dema." She glanced at him a little wildly, as if seeing him that moment. "Yes," she said. "Thank you." "I'll come back in a little while," he said, laid his hand on his heart, and quietly went out, closing the massive door behind him. He went across to the kitchen wing and demanded food and drink for a starving man, a thirsty man leg-cramped from crouching in a damned boat all night. He was not shy, and was used to the authority of his calling. It had been a long journey overland from the city, and then poling through the marshes, with Broad Isle the only hospitable place to stop among the endless channels, and the sun beating down all day, and then the long dreamlike discomfort of the night. He made much of his hunger and travail to amuse his hosts and to divert them, too, from asking questions about how the Husbandman did and would do. He did not want to tell them 'more than the man's wife knew. But they, discreet or knowing or respectful, asked no direct questions of him. Though their concern for Farre was plain, they asked only, by various indirections, if he was sure to live, and seemed satisfied by that assurance. In some faces Hamid thought he saw a glimpse of something beyond satisfaction: a brooding acceptance in one; an almost conniving intelligence in another. One young fellow blurted out, "Then will he be--" and shut his mouth, under the joined stares of five or six older people. They were a trapmouthed lot, the Sandry Islanders. All that were not actively young looked old:

seamed,weather beaten, brown skin wrinkled and silvery, hands gnarled, hair thick, coarse, and dry. Only their eyes were quick, observant. And some of them had eyes of an unusual color, like amber; Pask, his wife Dyadi, and several others, as well as Farre himself. The first time Hamid had seen Farre, before the coma deepened, he had been struck by the strong features and those light, clear eyes. They all spoke a strong dialect, but Hamid had grown up not far inland from the marshes, and anyhow had an ear for dialects. By the end of his large and satisfying breakfast he was glottal-stopping with the best of them. He returned to the great bedroom with a well-loaded tray. As he bad expected, the Farmwife, dressed and shod, was sitting close beside the bed, her hand lying lightly on her husband's hand.

She looked up at Hamid politely but as an intruder: please be quiet, don't interrupt us, make him be well and go away. . . . Hamid had no particular eye for beauty in women, perhaps having seen beauty too often at too short a distance, where it dissolves; but he responded to a woman's health, to the firm sweet flesh, the quiver and vigor of full life. And she was fully alive. She was as tender and powerful as a red-deer doe, as unconsciously splendid.

He wondered if there were fawns, and then saw the child standing behind her chair. The room, its shutters closed, was all shadow with a spatter and dappling of broken light across the islands of heavy furniture, the footboard of the bed, the folds of the coverlet, the child's face and dark eyes. "Hamiddem," the Farmwife said--despite her absorption in her husband she had caught his name, then, with the desperate keen hearing of the sickroom, where every word carries hope or doom--"I still cannot see him breathe." "Lay your ear against his chest," he said, in a tone deliberately louder than her whisper. "You'll hear the heart beat, and feel the lungs expand. Though slowly, as I said. Dema, I brought this for you. Now you'll sit here, see, at this table. A little more light, a shutter open, so. It won't disturb him, not at all. Light is good. You are to sit here and eat breakfast. Along with your daughter, who must be hungry, too." She introduced the child, Idi, a girl of five or six, who clapped her hand on her heart and whispered "Give-you-good-day-dema" all in one glottal-stopped word before she shrank back behind her mother: It is pleasant to be a physician and be obeyed, Hamid reflected, as the Farm-wife and her child, large and little images of each other in their shirts and full trousers and silken braided hair, sat at the table where he had put the tray down and meekly ate the breakfast he had brought. He was charmed to see that between them they left not a crumb. When Makali rose her face had lost the knotted look, and her dark eyes, though still large and still concerned, were tranquil. She has a peaceful heart, he

thought. At the same moment his physician's eye caught the signs; she was pregnant, probably about three months along. She whispered to the child, who trotted away. She came back to the chair at the bedside, which he had already relinquished. "I am going to examine and dress his wound," Hamid said. "Will you watch, dema, or come back?" "Watch," she said. "Good," he said. Taking off his coat, he asked her to have hot water sent in from the kitchen. "We have it piped," she said, and went to a door in the farthest shadowy corner. He had not expected such an amenity. Yet he knew that some of these island farms were very ancient places of civilization, drawing for their comfort and provision on inexhaustible sun, wind, and tide, settled in a way of life as immemorial as that of their plow-lands and pastures, as full and secure. Not the show-wealth of the city, but the deep richness of the land, was in the steaming pitcher she brought him, and in the woman who brought it. "You don't need it boiling?" she asked, and he said, "This is what I want." She was quick and steady, relieved to have a duty, to be of use. When he bared the great sword-wound across her husband's abdomen he glanced up at her to see how she took it. Compressed lips, a steady gaze. "This," he said, his fingers above the long, dark, unhealed gash, "looks the worst; but this, here, is the worst. That is superficial, a mere slash as the sword withdrew. But here, it went in, and deep." He probed the wound. There was no shrinking or quiver in the man's body; he lay insensible. "The sword withdrew," Hamid went on, "as the swordsman died. Your husband killed him even as he struck.

And took the sword from him. When his men came around him he was holding it in his left hand and his own sword in his right, though he could not rise from his knees. . . . Both those swords came here with us. . . . There, you see? That was a deep thrust. And a wide blade. That was nearly a deathblow. But not quite, not quite. Though to be sure, it took its toll." He looked up at her openly, hoping she would meet his eyes, hoping to receive from her the glance of acceptance, intelligence, recognition that he had seen in this face and that among Sandry's people. But her eyes were on the purple and livid wound, and her face was simply intent. "Was it wise to move him, carry him so far?" she asked, not questioning his judgment, but in wonder. "The Doctor said it would do him no harm," Hamid said. "And it has done none. The fever is gone, as it has been for nine days now." She nodded, for she had felt how cool Farre's skin was. "The inflammation of the wound is, if anything, less than it was two days ago. The pulse and breath are strong and steady. This was the place for him to be, dema." "Yes," she said. "Thank you. Thank you,

Hamiddem." Her clear eyes looked into his for a moment before returning to the wound, the motionless, muscular body, the silent

face, the closed eyelids. Surely, Hamid thought, surely if it were true she'd know it! She couldn't have married the man not knowing! But she says nothing. So it's not true, it's only a story. . . . But this thought, which gave him a tremendous relief for a moment, gave way to another: She knows and is hiding from the knowledge. Shutting the shadow into the locked room. Closing her ears in case the word is spoken. He found he had taken a deep breath and was holding it.

He wished the Farmwife were older, tougher, that she loved her farmer less. He wished he knew what the truth was, and that he need not be the one to speak it. But on an utterly unexpected impulse, he spoke: "It is not death," he said, very low, almost pleading. She merely nodded, watching. When he reached for a clean cloth, she had it ready to his hand. As a physician, he asked her of her pregnancy. She was well, all was well. He ordered her to walk daily, to be two hours out of the sickroom in the open air. He wished he might go with her, for he liked her and it would have been a pleasure to walk beside her, watching her go along tall and lithe and robust. But if she was to leave Farre's side for two hours, he was to replace her there: that was simply understood. He obeyed her implicit orders as she obeyed his explicit ones. His own freedom was considerable, for she spent most of the day in the sickroom, and there was no use his being there, too, little use his being there at all; in fact: Farre needed nothing from him or her or anyone, aside from the little nourishment he took. Twice a day, with infinite patience, she contrived to feed him ten or a dozen sips of Dr. Saker's rich brew of meat and herbs and medicines, which Hamid concocted and strained daily in the kitchen with the cooks' interested aid. Aside from those two half hours, and once a day the bed-jar for a few drops of urine, there was nothing to be done. No chafing or sores developed on Farre's skin. He lay unmoving, showing no discomfort. His eyes never opened. Once or twice, she said, in the night, he had moved a little, shuddered. Hamid had not seen him make any movement for days. Surely, if there was any truth in the old book Dr. Saker had shown him and in Pask's unwilling and enigmatic hints of confirmation, Makali would know? But she said never a word, and it was too late now for him to ask. He had lost his chance. And if he could not speak to her, he would not go behind her back, asking the others if there was any truth in this tale. Of course there isn't, he told his conscience. A myth, a rumor, a folktale of the 'Old Islanders'. . . and the word of an ignorant man, a saddler. . .

. Superstition! What do I see when I look at my patient? A deep coma. A deep, restorative coma. Unusual, yes, but not abnormal, not uncanny. Perhaps such a coma, a very long vegetative period of recovery, common to these islanders, an inbred people, would be the origin of the myth, much exaggerated, made fanciful. . . . They were a

healthy lot, and though he offered his services he had little to do once he had reset a boy's badly splinted arm and scraped out an old fellow's leg abscesses. Sometimes little Idi tagged after him. Clearly she adored her father and missed his company.

She never asked, "Will he get well," but Hamid had seen her crouched at the bedside, quite still, her cheek against Farre's unresponding hand. Touched by the child's dignity, Hamid asked her what games she and her father had played. She thought a long time before she said, "He would tell me what he was doing and sometimes I could help." Evidently she had simply followed Farre in his daily round of farmwork and management. Hamid provided only an unsatisfactory, frivolous substitute. She would listen to his tales of the court and city for a while, not very interested, and soon would run off to her own small, serious duties. Hamid grew restive under the burden of being useless. He found walking soothed him, and went almost daily on a favorite circuit: down to the quay and along the dunes to the southeast end of the island, from which he first saw the open sea, free at last of the whispering green levels of the reedbeds. Then up the steepest slope on Sandry, a low hill of worn granite and sparse earth, for the view of sea and tidal dams, island fields and green marshes from its summit, where a cluster of windmills caught the sea wind with slender vanes. Then down the slope past the trees, the Old Grove, to the farmhouse. There were a couple of dozen houses in sight from Sandry Hill, but 'the farmhouse' was the only one so called, as its owner was called the Husbandman, or Farmer Sandry, or simply Sandry if he was away from the island. And nothing would keep an Islander away from his island but his duty to the crown. Rooted folk, Hamid thought wryly, standing in the lane near the Old Grove to look at the trees. Elsewhere on the island, indeed on all the islands, there were no trees to speak of. Scrub willows down along the streams, a few orchards of wind-dwarfed, straggling apples. But here in the Grove were great trees, some with mighty trunks, surely hundreds of years old, and none of them less than eight or ten times a man's height. They did not crowd together but grew widely spaced, each spreading its limbs and crown broadly. In the spacious aisles under them grew a few shrubs and ferns and a thin, soft, pleasant grass. Their shade was beautiful on these hot summer days when the sun glared off the sea and the channels and the sea wind scarcely stirred the fiery air. But Hamid did not go under the trees. He stood in the lane, looking at that shade under the heavy foliage. Not far from the lane he could see in the grove a sunny gap where an old tree had come down, perishing in a winter gale maybe a century ago, for nothing was left of the fallen trunk but a grassy hummock a few yards long. No sapling had sprung up or been planted to replace the old

tree; only a wild rose, rejoicing in the light, flowered thornily over the ruin of its stump: Hamid walked on, gazing ahead at the house he now knew so well, the massive slate roofs, the shuttered win-dow of the room where Makali was sitting beside her husband, waiting for him to wake. "Makali, Makali," he said under his breath, grieving for her, angry with her, angry with himself, sorry for himself, listening to the sound of her name. The room was dark to his still sun-bedazzled eyes, but he went to his patient with a certain decisiveness, almost abruptness, and turned back the sheet. He palpated, auscultated, took the pulse. "His breathing has been harsh," Makali murmured. "He's dehydrated. Needs water." She rose to fetch the little silver bowl and spoon she used to feed him his soup and water, but Hamid shook his head. The picture in Dr. Saker's ancient book was vivid in his mind, a woodcut, showing exactly what must be done--what must be done, that is, if one believed this myth, which he did not, nor did Makali, or she would surely have said something by now! And yet, there was nothing else to be done. Farre's face was sunken, his hair came loose at a touch. He was dying, very slowly, of thirst. "The bed must be tipped; so that his head is high, his feet low," Hamid said authoritatively. "The easiest way will be to take off the footboard. Tebra will give me a hand." She went out and returned with the yardman, Tebra, and with him Hamid briskly set about the business. They got the bed fixed at such a slant that he had to put a webbing strap round Farre's chest to keep him from sliding quite down. He asked Makali for a waterproof sheet or cape. Then, fetching a deep copper basin from the kitchen, he filled it with cold water. He spread the sheet of oilskin she had brought under Farre's legs and feet, and propped the basin in an overturned footstool so that it held steady as he laid Farre's feet in the water. "It must be kept full enough that his soles touch the water," he said to Makali. "It will keep him cool," she said, asking, uncertain. Hamid did not answer. Her troubled, frightened look enraged him. He left the room without saying more. When he returned in the evening she said, "His breathing is much easier." No doubt, Hamid thought, auscultating, now that he breathes once a minute. "Hamiddem," she said, "there is . . . something I noticed " "Yes:" She heard his ironic, hostile tone, as he did. Both winced. But she was started, had begun to speak, could only go on. "His . . ." She started again. "It seemed . . ." She drew the sheet down farther, exposing Farre's genitals. The penis lay almost indistinguishable from the testicles and the brown, grained skin of the inner groin, as if it had sunk into them, as if all were returning to an indistinguishable unity, a featureless solidity. "Yes," Hamid said, expressionless, shocked in spite of himself. "The . . . the process is following . . . what is said to be its course." She looked at him across

her husband's body. "But-- Can't you--?" He stood silent a while. "It seems that-- My information is that in these cases-- a very grave shock to the system, to the body,"--he paused, trying to find words--"such as an injury or a great loss, a grief--but in this case, an injury, an almost fatal wound-- A wound that almost certainly would have been fatal, had not it inaugurated the . . . the process in question, the inherited capacity . . . propensity . .

." She stood still, still gazing straight at him, so that all the big words shrank to nothing in his mouth. He stooped and with his deft, professional gentleness opened Farre's closed eyelid. "Look!" he said. She too stooped to look, to see the blind eye exposed, without pupil, iris, or white, a polished, featureless, brown bead. When her indrawn breath was repeated and again repeated in a dragging sob, Hamid burst out at last, "But you knew, surely!

You knew when you married him." "Knew," said her dreadful indrawn voice. The hair stood up on Hamid's arms and scalp. He could not look at her. He lowered the eyelid, thin and stiff as a dry leaf. She turned away and walked slowly across the long room into the shadows. "They laugh about it," said the deep, dry voice he had never heard, out of the shadows. "On the land, in the city, people laugh about it, don't they. They talk about the wooden men, the blockheads, the Old Islanders. They don't laugh about it here. When he married me-- " She turned to face Hamid, stepping into the shaft of warm twilight from the one unshuttered window so that her clothing glimmered white. "When Farre of Sandry, Farre Older courted me and married me, on the Broad Isle where I lived, the people there said don't do it to me, and the people here said don't do it to him. Marry your own kind, marry in your own kind. But what did we care for that? He didn't care and I didn't care. I didn't believe! I wouldn't believe! But I came here-- Those trees, the Grove, the older trees--you've been there, you've seen them. Do you know they have names?" She stopped, and the dragging, gasping, indrawn sob began again. She took hold of a chair back and stood racking it back and forth: "He took me there. 'That is my grandfather,'" she said in a hoarse, jeering gasp. "'That's Alta, my mother's grandmother. Dorandem has stood four hundred years.'" Her voice failed. "We don't laugh about it," Hamid said. "It is a tale--something that might be true--a mystery. Who they are, the . . . the olders, what makes them change . . . how it happens. . . . Dr. Saker sent me here not only to be of use but to learn. To verify . . . the process." "The process," Makali said. She came back to the bedside, facing him across it, across the stiff body, the log in the bed. "What am I carrying here?" she asked, soft and hoarse, her hands on her belly. "A child," Hamid said, without hesitating and clearly. "What kind of child?" "Does it matter?" She said nothing. "His child, your

child, as your daughter is. Do you know what kind of child Idi is?" After a while Makali said softly, "Like me. She does not have the amber eyes." "Would you care less for her if she did?" "No," she said. She stood silent. She looked down at her husband, then toward the windows, then straight at Harold. "You came to learn," she said. "Yes. And to give what help I can give." She nodded. "Thank you," she said. He laid his hand a moment on his heart. She sat down in her usual place beside the bed with a deep, very quiet breath, too quiet to be a sigh. Hamid opened his mouth.

"He's blind, deaf, without feeling. He doesn't know if you're there or not there. He's a log, a block, you need not keep this vigil!" All these words said themselves aloud in his mind, but he did not speak one of them. He closed his mouth and stood silent. "How long?" she asked in her usual soft voice. "I don't know. That change . . . came quickly. Maybe not long now." She nodded. She laid her hand on her husband's hand, her light warm touch on the hard bones under hard skin, the long, strong, motionless fingers. "Once," she said, "he showed me the stump of one of the olders, one that fell down a long time ago." Hamid nodded, thinking of the sunny clearing in the grove, the wild rose. "It had broken right across in a great storm, the trunk had been rotten. It was old, ancient, they weren't sure even who . . . the name . . . hundreds of years old. The roots were still in the ground but the trunk was rotten. So it broke right across in the gale. But the stump was still there in the ground. And you could see. He showed me." After a pause she said, "You could see the bones. The leg bones. In the trunk of the tree. Like pieces of ivory. Inside it. Broken off with it." After another silence, she said, "So they do die. Finally." Hamid nodded. Silence again. Though he listened and watched almost automatically, Hamid did not see Farre's chest rise or fall. "You may go whenever you like, Hamiddem," she said gently. "I'm all right now. Thank you." He went to his room. On the table, under the lamp when he lighted it, lay some leaves. He had picked them up from the border of the lane that went by the grove, the grove of the older trees. A few dry leaves, a twig What their blossom was, their fruit, he did not know. It was summer, between the flower and the seed. And he dared not take a branch, a twig, a leaf from the living tree. When he joined the people of the farm for supper, old Pask was there. "Doctor-dem," the saddler said in his rumbling bass, "is he turning?" "Yes," Hamid said. "So you're giving him water?" "Yes." "You must give him water, dema," the old man said, relentless. "She doesn't know. She's not his kind. She doesn't know his needs." "But she bears his seed," said Hamid, grinning suddenly, fiercely, at the old man. Pask did not smile or make any sign, his stiff face impassive.

He said, "Yes. The girl's not, but the other may be older." And he

turned away. Next morning after he had sent Makali out for her walk, Hamid studied

Farre's feet. They were extended fully into the water, as if he had stretched downward to it, and the skin looked softer. The long brown toes stretched apart a little. And his hands, still motionless, seemed longer, the fingers knotted as with arthritis yet powerful, lying spread on the coverlet at his sides. Makali came back ruddy and sweaty from her walk in the summer morning. Her vitality, her vulnerability were infinitely moving and pathetic to Hamid after his long contemplation of a slow, inexorable toughening, hardening, withdrawal. He said, "Makali-dem, there is no need for you to be here all day. There is nothing to do for him but keep the water-basin full." "So it means nothing to him that ! sit by him," she said, half questioning half stating. "I think it does not. Not any more." She nodded. Her gallantry touched him. He longed to help her. "Dema, did he, did anyone ever speak to you about--if this should happen-- There may be ways we can ease the change, things that are traditionally done-- I don't know them. Are there people here whom I might ask--Pask and Dyadi--?" "Oh, they'll know what to do when the time comes," she said, with an edge in her voice. "They'll see to it that it's done right. The right way, the old way. You don't have to worry about that. The doctor doesn't have to bury his patient, after all. The grave diggers do that." "He is not dead." "No. Only blind and deaf and dumb and doesn't know if I'm in the room or a hundred miles away." She looked up at Hamid, a gaze which for some reason embarrassed him. "If I stuck a knife in his hand would he feel it?" she asked. He chose to take the question as one of curiosity, desire to know. "The response to any stimulus has grown steadily less," he said, "and in the last few days it has disappeared. That is, response to any stimulus I've offered." He took up Farre's wrist and pinched it as hard as he could, though the skin was so tough now and the flesh so dry that he had difficulty doing so. She watched. "He was ticklish," she said. Hamid shook his head. He touched the sole of the long brown foot that rested in the basin of water; there was no withdrawal, no response at all. "So he feels nothing. Nothing hurts him," she said. "I think not." "Lucky him." Embarrassed again, Hamid bent down to study the wound. He had left off the bandages, for the slash had closed, leaving a clean seam, and the deep gash had developed a tough lip all round it, a barky ring that was well on the way to sealing it shut. "I could carve my name on him," Makali said, leaning close to Hamid, and then she bent down over the inert body, kissing and stroking and holding it; her tears running down. When she had wept a while, Hamid went to call the women of the household, and they came gathering round her full of solace and took her off to an,other room. Left alone, Hamid drew the sheet back up over Farre's

chest; he felt a satisfaction in her having wept at last, having broken down. Tears were the natural reaction, and the necessary one. A woman clears her mind by weeping, a woman had told him once. He flicked his thumbnail hard against Farre's shoulder. It was like flicking the headboard, the night table--his nail stung for a moment. He felt a surge of anger against his patient, no patient, no man at all, not any more. Was his own mind clear? Why was he angry with Farre? Could the man help being what he was, or what he was becoming? Hamid went out of the house and walked his circuit, went to his own room to read. Late in the afternoon he went to the sickroom. No one was there with Farre. He pulled out the chair she had sat in so many days and nights and sat down. The shadowy silence of the room soothed his mind. A healing was occurring here: a strange healing, a mystery, frightening, but real. Farre had traveled from mortal injury and pain to this quietness; had turned from death to this different, this other life, this older life. Was there any wrong in that? Only that he wronged her in leaving her behind, and he must have done that, and more cruelly, if he had died. Or was the cruelty in his not dying? Hamid was still there pondering, half asleep in the twilit serenity of the room, when Makali came in quietly and lighted a dim lamp. She wore a loose, light shirt that showed the movement of her full breasts, and her gauze trousers were gathered at the ankle above her bare feet; it was a hot night, sultry, the air stagnant on the salt marshes and the sandy fields of the island. She came around the bedstead.

Hamid started to get up. "No, no, stay. I'm sorry, Hamid-dem. Forgive me. Don't get up. I only wanted to apologize for behaving like a child." "Grief must find its way out," he said. "I hate to cry. Tears empty me. And pregnancy makes one cry over nothing." "This is a grief worth crying for, dema." "Oh, yes," she said. "If we had loved each other. Then I might have cried that basin full." She spoke with a hard lightness. "But that was over years ago. He went off to the war to get away from me. This child I carry, it isn't his. He was always cold, always slow. Always what he is now." She looked down at the figure in the bed with a quick, strange, challenging glance. "They were right," she said, "half-alive shouldn't marry the living. If your wife was a stick, was a stump, a lump of wood, wouldn't you seek some friend of flesh and blood? Wouldn't you seek the love of your own kind?" As she spoke she came nearer to Hamid, very near, stooping over him.

Her closeness, the movement of her clothing, the warmth and smell of her body, filled his world suddenly and entirely, and when she laid her hands on his shoulders he reached up to her, sinking upward into her, pulling her down onto him to drink her body with his mouth, to impale her heavy softness on the aching point of his desire, so lost in her that she had pulled away from him before he

knew it. She was turning from him, turning to the bed, where with a long, creaking groan the stiff body trembled and shook, trying to bend, to rise, and the round blank balls of the eyes stared out under lifted eyelids. "There!" Makali cried, breaking free of Hamid's hold, standing triumphant. "Farre!" The stiff half-lifted arms, the outspread fingers trembled like branches in the wind. No more than that. Again the deep, cracking, creaking groan from within the rigid body. She huddled up against it on the tilted bed, stroking the face and kissing the unblinking eyes, the lips, the breast, the scarred belly, the lump between the joined, grown-together legs. "Go back now," she murmured, "go back to sleep. Go back, my dear, my own, my love, go back now, now I know, now I know . . ." Hamid broke from his paralysis and left the room, the house, striding blindly out into the luminous midsummer night. He was very angry with her, for using him; presently with himself, for being usable. His outrage began to die away as he walked. Stopping, seeing where he was, he gave a short, rueful, startled laugh. He had gone astray off the lane, following a path that led right into the Old Grove, a path he had never taken before. All around him, near and far, the huge trunks of the trees were almost invisible under the massive darkness of their crowns. Here and there the moonlight struck through the foliage, making the edges of the leaves silver, pooling like quicksilver in the grass. It was cool under the older trees, windless, perfectly silent. Harold shivered: "He'll be with you soon," he said to the thick-bodied, huge-armed, deep-rooted, dark presences. "Pask and the others know what to do. He'll be here soon. And she'll come here with the baby, summer afternoons, and sit in his shade. Maybe she'll be buried here. At his roots. But I am not staying here." He was walking as he spoke, back toward the farmhouse and the quay and the channels through the reeds and the roads that led inland, north, away. "If you don't mind, I'm on my way, right away. . . .

" The olders stood unmoved as he hurried out from under them and strode down the lane, a dwindling figure, too slight, too quick to be noticed.

URSULA LE GUIN SOCIAL DREAMING OF THE FRIN ON THE FRINTHIAN PLANE dreams are not private property. There is no such thing as a dream of one's own. A troubled Frin has no need to lie on a couch recounting dreams to a psychoanalist, for the doctor already knows what the patient dreamed last night, because the doctor dreamed it too; and the patient also dreamed what the doctor dreamed; and so did everyone else in the neighborhood. To escape from the dreams of others or to have a secret dream, the Frin must go out alone into the wilderness. And even in the wilderness, their sleep may be

invaded by the strange dream-visions of lions, antelope, bears, or mice. While awake, and during much of their sleep, the Frin are as dream-deaf as we are. Only sleepers who are in or approaching REM sleep can participate in the dreams of others also in REM sleep. REM is an acronym for "rapid eye movement," a visible accompaniment of this stage of sleep; its signal in the brain is a characteristic type of electro-encephalic wave. Most of our rememberable dreams occur during REM sleep. Frinthian REM sleep and that of people on our plane yield very similar EEG traces, though there are some significant differences, in which may lie the key to their ability to share dreams. To share, the dreamers must be fairly close to one another. The carrying power of the average Frinthian dream is about that of the average human voice. A dream can be received easily within a hundred-meter radius, and bits and fragments of it may carry a good deal farther. A strong dream in a solitary place may well carry for two kilometers or even farther. In a lonely farmhouse a Frin's dreams mingle only with those of the rest of the family, along with echoes, whiffs, and glimpses of what the cattle in the barn and the dog dozing on the doorstop hear, smell, and see in their sleep. In a village or town, with people asleep in all the houses round, the Frin spend at least part of every night in a shifting phantasmagoria of their own and other people's dreams which I find it hard to imagine. I asked an acquaintance in a small town to tell me any dreams she could recall from the past night. At first she demurred, saying that they'd all been nonsense, and only "strong" dreams ought to be thought about and talked over. She was evidently reluctant to tell me, an outsider, things that had been going on in her neighbors' heads. I managed at last to convince her that my interest was genuine and not voyeuristic. She thought a while and said, "Well, there was a woman -- it was me in the dream, or sort of me, but I think it was the mayor's wife's dream, actually, they live at the corner -- this woman, anyhow, and she was trying to find a baby that she'd had last year. She had put the baby into a dresser drawer and forgotten all about it, and now I was, she was, feeling worried about it -- Had it had anything to eat? Since last year? O my word, how stupid we are in dreams! And then, oh, yes, then there was an awful argument between a naked man and a dwarf, they were in an empty cistern. That may have been my own dream, at least to start with. Because I know that cistern. It was on my grandfather's farm where I used to stay when I was a child. But they both turned into lizards, I think. And then -- oh yes!" -- she laughed -- "I was being squashed by a pair of giant breasts, huge ones, with pointy nipples. I think that was the teenage boy next door, because I was terrified but kind of ecstatic, too. And what else was there? Oh, a mouse, it looked so delicious, and it didn't know I was there, and I

was just about to pounce, but then there was a horrible thing, a nightmare -- a face without any eyes -- and huge, hairy hands groping at me -- and then I heard the three-year-old next door screaming, because I woke up too. That poor child has so many nightmares, she drives us all crazy. Oh, I don't really like thinking about that one. I'm glad you forget most dreams. Wouldn't it be awful if you had to remember them all!" Dreaming is a cyclical, not a continuous activity, and so in small communities there are hours when one's sleep-theater, if one may call it so, is dark. REM sleep among settled, local groups of Frin tends to synchronize.

As the cycles peak, about five times a night, several or many dreams may be going on simultaneously in everybody's head, intermingling and influencing one another with their mad, inarguable logic, so that (as my friend in the village described it) the baby turns up in the cistern and the mouse hides between the breasts, while the eyeless monster disappears in the dust kicked up by a pig trotting past through a new dream, perhaps a dog's, since the pig is rather dimly seen, but is smelt with enormous particularity. But after such episodes comes a period when everyone can sleep in peace, without anything exciting happening at all. In Frinthian cities, where one may be within dream-range of hundreds of people every night, the layering and overlap of insubstantial imagery is, I'm told, so continual and so confusing that the dreams cancel out, like brushfuls of colors slapped one over the other without design; even one's own dream blurs at once into the meaningless commotion, as if projected on a screen where a hundred films were already being shown, their soundtracks all running together. Only occasionally does a gesture, a voice, ring clear for a moment, or a particularly vivid wet dream or ghastly nightmare cause all the sleepers in a neighborhood to sigh, ejaculate, shudder, or wake up with a gasp. Frin whose dreams are mostly troubling or disagreeable say they like living in the city for the very reason that their dreams are all but lost in the "stew," as they call it. But others are upset by the constant oneiric noise and dislike spending even a few nights in a metropolis. "I hate to dream strangers' dreams!" my village informant told me. "Ugh! When I come back from staying in the city, I wish I could wash out the inside of my head!" EVEN ON OUR PLANE, young children often have trouble understanding that the experiences they had just before they woke up aren't "real." It must be far more bewildering for Frinthian children, into whose innocent sleep enter the sensations and preoccupations of adults accidents relived, griefs renewed, rapes reenacted, wrathful conversations with people fifty years in the grave. But adult Frin are ready to answer children's questions about the shared dreams and to discuss them, defining them always as dream, though not as unreal. There is no

word corresponding to "unreal" in Frinthian; the nearest is "bodiless." So the children learn to live with adults' incomprehensible memories, unmentionable acts, and inexplicable emotions, much as do children who grow up on our plane amid the terrible incoherence of civil war or in times of plague and famine; or, indeed, children anywhere, at any time. Children learn what is real and what isn't, what to notice and what to ignore, as a survival tactic, a means of staying alive. It is hard for an outsider to judge, but my impression of Frinthian children is that they mature early, psychologically; and by the age of seven or eight they are treated by adults as equals. As for the animals, no one knows what they make of the human dreams they evidently participate in. The domestic beasts of the Frin seemed to me to be remarkably pleasant, trustful, and intelligent. They are generally well looked after. The fact that they share their dreams with their animals might explain why the Frin use animals to haul and plow and for milk and wool, but not as meat. The Frin say that animals are more sensitive dream-receivers than human beings, and can receive dreams even from people from other planes. Frinthian farmers have assured me that their cattle and swine are deeply disturbed by visits from people from carnivorous planes. When I stayed at a farm in Enya Valley the chicken-house was in an uproar half the night. I thought it was a fox, but my hosts said it was me. People who have mingled their dreams all their lives say they are often uncertain where a dream began, whether it was originally theirs or somebody else's; but within a family or village the author of a particularly erotic or ridiculous dream may be all too easily identified. People who know one another well can recognize the source-dreamer from the tone or events of the dream, its style. But after all, it has become their own as they dream it. Each dream may be shaped differently in each mind. And, as with us, the personality of the dreamer, the oneiric I, is often tenuous, strangely disguised, or unpredictably different from the daylight person. Very puzzling dreams or those with powerful emotional affect may be discussed on and off all day by the community, without the origin of the dream ever being mentioned. But most dreams, as with us, are forgotten at waking. Dreams elude their dreamers, on every plane. It might seem to us that the Frill have very little psychic privacy; but they are protected by this common amnesia, as well as by doubt as to any particular dream's origin, and by the obscurity of dream itself. And their dreams are truly common property. The sight of a red and black bird pecking at the ear of a bearded human head lying on a plate on a marble table and the rush of almost gleeful horror that accompanied it -- did that come from Aunt Unia's sleep, or Uncle Tu's, or Grandfather's, or the cook's, or the girl next door's? A child might ask, "Auntie, did you dream that head?" The stock answer

is, "We all did." Which is, of course, the truth. Frinthian families and small communities are close-knit and generally harmonious, though quarrels and feuds occur. The research group from Mills College that traveled to the Frinthian plane to record and study oneiric brainwave synchrony agreed that (like the synchronization of menstrual and other cycles within groups on our plane) communal dreaming may serve to strengthen the social bond. They did not speculate as to its psychological or moral effects. From time to time a Frin is born with unusual powers of projecting and receiving dreams -- never one without the other. The Frin call such a dreamer whose "signal" is unusually clear and powerful a strong mind. That strong-minded dreamers can receive dreams from non-Frinthian humans is a proven fact. Some of them apparently can share dreams with fish, with insects, even with trees. A legendary strong mind named Du Ir claimed that he "dreamed with the mountains and the rivers," but his boast is generally regarded as poetry. Strong minds are recognized even before birth, when the mother begins to dream that she lives in a warm, amber-colored palace without directions or gravity, full of shadows and complex rhythms and musical vibrations, and shaken often by slow peaceful earthquakes -- a dream the whole community enjoys, though late in the pregnancy it may be accompanied by a sense of pressure, of urgency, that rouses claustrophobia in some. As the strong-minded child grows, its dreams reach two or three times farther than those of ordinary people, and tend to override or co-opt local dreams going on at the same time. The nightmares and inchoate, passionate deliria of a strong- minded child who is sick, abused, or unhappy can disturb everyone in the neighborhood, even in the next village. Such children, therefore, are treated with care; every effort is made to make their life one of good cheer and disciplined serenity. If the family is incompetent or uncaring, the village or town may intervene, the whole community earnestly seeking to ensure the child peaceful days and nights of pleasant dreams. "World-strong minds" are legendary figures, whose dreams supposedly came to everyone in the world, and who therefore also dreamed the dreams of everyone in the world. Such men and women are revered as holy people, ideals and models for the strong dreamers of today. The moral pressure on strong-minded people is in fact intense, and so must be the psychic pressure. None of them lives in a city: they would go mad, dreaming a whole city's dreams. Mostly they gather in small communities where they live very quietly, widely dispersed from one another at night, practicing the art of "dreaming well," which mostly means dreaming harmlessly. But some of them become guides, philosophers, visionary leaders. There are still many tribal societies on the Frinthian plane, and the Mills researchers visited several. They reported that among

these peoples, strong minds are regarded as seers or shamans, with the usual perquisites and penalties of such eminence. If during a famine the tribe's strong mind dreams of traveling clear down the river and feasting by the sea, the whole tribe may share the vision of the journey and the feast so vividly, with such conviction, that they decide to pack up and start downriver. If they find food along the way, or shellfish and edible seaweeds on the beach, their strong mind gets rewarded with the choice bits; but if they find nothing or run into trouble with other tribes, the seer, now called "twisted mind," may be beaten or driven out. The elders told the researchers that tribal councils usually follow the guidance of dream only if other indications favor it. The strong minds themselves urge caution. A seer among the Eastern zhud-Byu told the researchers, "This is what I say to my people: Some dreams tell us what we wish to believe. Some dreams tell us what we fear. Some dreams are of what we know though we may not know we knew it. The rarest dream is the dream that tells us what we did not know." Frinthia has been open to other planes for over a century, but the rural scenery and quiet lifestyle have brought no great influx of visitors. Many tourists avoid the plane under the impression that the Frin are a race of "mindsuckers" and

"psychovoyeurs." Most Frin are still farmers, villagers, or town-dwellers, but the cities and their material technologies are growing fast. Though technologies and techniques can be imported only with the permission of the All-Frin government, requests for such permission by Frinthian companies and individuals have become increasingly frequent. Many Frin welcome this growth of urbanism and materialism, justifying it as the result of the interpretation of dreams received by their strong minds from visitors from other planes. "People came here with strange dreams," says the historian Tubar of Kaps, himself a strong mind. "Our strongest minds joined in them, and joined us with them. So we all began to see things we had never dreamed of. Vast gatherings of people, cybernets, ice cream, much commerce, many pleasant belongings and useful artifacts. 'Shall these remain only dreams?' we said. 'Shall we not bring these things into wakeful being?' So we have done that." Other thinkers take a more dubious attitude toward alien hypnogogia. What troubles them most is that the dreaming is not reciprocal. For though a strong mind can share the dreams of an alien visitor and "broadcast" them to other Frin, nobody from another plane has been capable of sharing the dreams of the Frin. We cannot enter their nightly festival of fantasies. We are not on their wavelength. The investigators from Mills hoped to be able to reveal the mechanism by which communal dreaming is effected, but they failed, as Frinthian scientists have also failed, so far. "Telepathy," much hyped in the literature of the interplanary travel

agents, is a label, not an explanation. Researchers have established that the genetic programming of all Frinthian mammals includes the capacity for dream-sharing, but its operation, though clearly linked to the brainwave synchrony of sleepers, remains obscure. Visiting foreigners do not synchronize; they do not participate in that nightly ghost-chorus of electric impulses dancing to the same beat. But unwittingly, unwillingly -- like a deaf child shouting -- they send out their own dreams to the strong minds asleep nearby. And to many of the Frin, this seems not so much a sharing as a pollution or infection. "The purpose of our dreams," says the philosopher Sorrdja of Farfrit, a strong dreamer of the ancient Deyu Retreat, "is to enlarge our souls by letting us imagine all that can be imagined: to release us from the tyranny and bigotry of the individual self by letting us feel the fears, desires, and delights of every mind in every living body near us." The duty of the strong-minded person, she holds, is to strengthen dreams, to focus them -- not with a view to practical results or new inventions, but as a means of understanding the world through a myriad of experiences and sentiences (not only human). The dreams of the greatest dreamers may offer to those who share them a glimpse of an order underlying all the chaotic stimuli, responses, acts, words, intentions, imaginings of daily and nightly existence. "In the day we are apart," she says. "In the night we are together. We should follow our own dreams, not those of strangers who cannot join us in the dark. With such people we can talk; we can learn from them and teach them. We should do so, for that is the way of the daylight. But the way of the night is different. We go together then, apart from them. The dream we dream is our road through the night. They know our day, but not our night, nor the ways we go there. Only we can find our own way, showing one another, following the lantern of the strong mind, following our dreams in darkness." The resemblance of Sorrdja's phrase "road through the night" to Freud's "royal road to the unconscious" is interesting but, I believe, superficial. Visitors from my plane have discussed psychological theory with the Frin, but neither Freud's nor Jung's views of dream are of much interest to them. The Frinthian "royal road" is trodden not by one secret soul but a multitude. Repressed feelings, however distorted, disguised, and symbolic, are the common property of everybody in one's household and neighborhood. The Frinthian unconscious, collective or individual, is not a dark wellspring buried deep under years of evasions and denials, but a kind of great moonlit lake to whose shores everybody comes to swim together naked every night. And so the interpretation of dreams is not, among the Frin, a means of self-revelation, of private psychic inquiry and readjustment. It is not even species-specific, since animals share the dreams, though only the Frin

can talk about them. For them, dream is a communion of all the sentient creatures in the world. It puts the notion of self deeply into question. I can imagine only that for them to fall asleep is to abandon the self utterly, to enter or reenter into the limitless community of being, almost as death is for us.

URSULA K. Le GUIN SOLITUDE * An addition to "POVERTY: The Second Report on Eleven-Soro" by Mobile Entselenne'temharyonoterregwis Leaf, by her daughter, Serenity. MY MOTHER, A FIELD ETHnologist, took the difficulty of learning anything about the people of Eleven-Soro as a personal challenge. The fact that she used her children to meet that challenge might be seen as selfishness or as selflessness. Now that I have read her report I know that she finally thought she had done wrong. Knowing what it cost her, I wish she knew my gratitude to her for allowing me to grow up as a person. Shortly after a robot probe reported people of the Hainish Descent on the eleventh planet of the Soro system, she joined the orbital crew as back-up for the three First Observers down on planet. She had spent four years in the tree-cities of nearby Huthu. My brother In Joy Born was eight years old and I was five; she wanted a year or two of ship duty so we could spend some time in a Hainish-style school. My brother had enjoyed the rainforests of Huthu very much, but though he could brachiate he could barely read, and we were all bright blue with skin-fungus. While Borny learned to read and I learned to wear clothes and we all had antifungus treatments, my mother became as intrigued by Eleven-Sort as the Observers were frustrated by it. All this is in her report, but I will say it as I learned it from her, which helps me remember and understand. The language had been recorded by the probe and the Observers had spent a year learning it. The many dialectical ;. variations excused their accents and errors, and they reported that language was not a problem. Yet there was a communication problem. The two men found themselves isolated, faced with suspicion or hostility, unable to form any connection with the native men, all of whom lived in solitary houses as hermits or in pairs. Finding communities of adolescent males, they tried to make contact with them, but when they entered the territory of such a group the boys either fled or rushed desperately at them trying to kill them. The women, who lived in what they called "dispersed villages," drove them away with volleys of stones as soon as they came anywhere near the houses. "I believe," one of them reported, "that the only community activity of the Sorovians is throwing rocks at men." Neither of them succeeded in having a conversation of more than three exchanges with a man. One of them mated with a woman who came by his camp; he reported that though she made unmistakable and insistent advances, she seemed disturbed

by his attempts to converse, refused to answer his questions, and left him, he said, "as soon as she got what she came for." The woman Observer was allowed to settle in an unused house in a "village" (auntring) of seven houses. She made excellent observations of daily life, insofar as she could see any of it, and had several conversations with adult women and many with children; but she found that she was never asked into another woman's house, nor expected to help or ask for help in any work. Conversation concerning normal activities was unwelcome to the other women; the children, her only informants, called her Aunt Crazy-Jabber. Her aberrant behavior caused increasing distrust and dislike among the women, and they began to keep their children away from her. She left. "There's no way," she told my mother, "for an adult to learn anything. They don't ask questions, they don't answer questions. Whatever they learn, they learn when they're children." Aha! said my mother to herself, looking at Borny and me. And she requested a family transfer to Eleven. Sort with Observer status. The Stabiles interviewed her extensively by ansible, and talked with Borny and even with me-- I don't remember it, but she told me I told the Stabiles all about my new stockings--and agreed to her request. The ship was to stay in close orbit, with the previous Observers in the crew, and she was to keep radio contact with it, daily if possible. I have a dim memory of the tree-city, and of playing with what must have been a kitten or a ghole-kit on the ship; but my first clear memories are of our house in the auntring. It is half underground, half aboveground, with wattle-and-daub walls. Mother and I are standing outside it in the warm sunshine. Between us is a big mudpuddle, into which Borny pours water from a basket; then he runs off to the creek to get more water. I muddle the mud with my hands, deliciously, till it is thick and smooth. I pick up a big double handful and slap it onto the walls where the sticks show through. Mother says, "That's good! That's right!" in our new language, and I realize that this is work, and I am doing it. I am repairing the house. I am making it right, doing it right. I am a competent person. I have never doubted that, so long as I lived there. We are inside the house at night, and Borny is talking to the ship on the radio, because he misses talking the old language, and anyway he is supposed to tell them stuff. Mother is making a basket and sweating at the split reeds. I am singing a song to drown out Borny so nobody in the auntring hears him talking funny, and anyway I like singing. I learned this song this afternoon in Hyuru's house. I play every day with Hyuru. "Be aware, listen, listen, be aware," I sing. When Mother stops swearing she listens, and then she turns on the recorder. There is a little fire still left from cooking dinner, which was lovely pigi root, I never get tired of pigi. It is dark and warm and smells of pigi and of burning duhur, which is a strong,

sacred smell to drive out magic and bad feelings, and as I sing "Listen, be aware," I get sleepier and sleepier and lean against Mother, who is dark and warm and smells like Mother, strong and sacred, full of good feelings. Our daily life in the auntring was repetitive. On the ship, later, I learned that people who live in artificially complicated situations call such a life "simple." I never knew anybody, anywhere I have been, who found life simple. I think a life or a time looks simple when you leave out the details, the way a planet looks smooth, from orbit. Certainly our life in the auntring was easy, in the sense that our needs came easily to hand. There was plenty of food to be gathered or grown and prepared and cooked, plenty of temas to pick and rett and spin and weave for clothes and bedding plenty of reeds to make baskets and thatch with; we children had other children to play with, mothers to look after us, and a great deal to learn. None of this is simple, though it's all easy enough, when you know how to do it, when you are aware of the details. It was not easy for my mother. It was hard for her, and complicated. She had to pretend she knew the details while she was learning them, and had to think how to report and explain this way of living to people in another place who didn't understand it. For Borny it was easy until it got hard because he was a boy. For me it was all easy. I learned the work and played with the children and listened to the mothers sing. The First Observer had been quite right: there was no way for a grown woman to learn how to make her soul. Mother couldn't go listen to another mother sing, it would have been too strange. The aunts all knew she hadn't been brought up well, and some of them taught her a good deal without her realizing it. They had decided her mother must have been irresponsible and had gone on scouting instead of settling in an auntring so that her daughter didn't get educated properly. That's why even the most aloof of the aunts always let me listen with their children, so that I could become an educated person. But of course they couldn't ask another adult into their houses. Borny and I had to tell her all the songs and stories we learned, and then she would tell them to the radio, or we told them to the radio while she listened to us. But she never got it right, not really. How could she, trying to learn it after she'd grown up, and after she'd always lived with magicians? "Be aware!" she would imitate my solemn and probably irritating imitation of the aunts and the big gifts. "Be aware! How many times a day do they say that? Be aware of what?

They aren't aware of what the ruins are, their own history, -- they aren't aware of each other! They don't even talk to each other! Be aware, indeed!" When I told her the stories of the Before Time that Aunt Sadne and Aunt Noyit told their daughters and me, she often heard the wrong things in them. I told her about the People, and she

said, "Those are the ancestors of the people here now." When I said, "There aren't any people here now," she didn't understand. "There are persons here now," I said, but she still didn't understand. Borny liked the story about the Man Who Lived with Women, how he kept some women in a pen, the way some persons keep rats in a pen for eating, and all of them got pregnant, and they each had a hundred babies, and the babies grew up as horrible monsters and ate the man and the mothers and each other. Mother explained to us that that was a parable of the human overpopulation of this planet thousands of years ago. "No, it's not," I said, "it's a moral story." -- "Well, yes," Mother said. "The moral is, don't have too many babies." -- "No, it's not," I said. "Who could have a hundred babies even if they wanted to? The man was a sorceror. He did magic. The women did it with him. So of course their children were monsters." The key, of course, is the word "tekell," which translates so nicely into the Hainish word "magic," an art or power that violates natural law. It was hard for Mother to understand that some persons truly consider most human

relationships unnatural; that marriage, for instance, or government, can be seen as an evil spell woven by sorcerors. It is hard for her people to believe magic. The ship kept asking if we were all right, and every now and then a Stabile would hook up the ansible to our radio and grill Mother and us. She always convinced them that she wanted to stay, for despite her frustrations, she was doing the work the First Observers had not been able to do, and Borny and I were happy as mudfish, all those first years. I think Mother was happy too, once she got used to the slow pace and the indirect way she had to learn things. She was lonely, missing other grown-ups to talk to, and told us that she would have gone crazy without us. If she missed sex she never showed it. I think, though, that her Report is not very complete about sexual matters, perhaps because she was troubled by them. I know that when we first lived in the auntring, two of the aunts, Hedimi and Behyu, used to meet to make love, and Behyu courted my mother; but Mother didn't understand, because Behyu wouldn't talk the way Mother wanted to talk. She couldn't understand having sex with a person whose house you wouldn't enter. Once when I was nine or so, and had been listening to some of the older girls, I asked her why didn't she go out scouting. "Aunt Sadne would look after us," I said, hopefully. I was tired of being the uneducated woman's daughter. I wanted to live in Aunt Sadne's house and be just like the other children. "Mothers don't scout," she said, scornfully, like an aunt. "Yes, they do, sometimes," I insisted. "They have to, or how could they have more than one baby?" "They go to settled men near the auntring. Behyu went back to the Red Knob Hill Man when she wanted a second child. Sadne goes and sees Downriver Lame Man

when she wants to have sex. They know the men around here. None of the mothers scout." I realized that in this case she was right and I was wrong, but I stuck to my point. "Well, why don't you go see Downriver Lame Man? Don't you ever want sex? Migi says she wants it all the time." "Migi is seventeen," Mother said drily.

"Mind your own nose." She sounded exactly like all the other mothers. Men, during my childhood, were a kind of uninteresting mystery to me. They turned up a lot in the Before Time stories, and the singing-circle girls talked about them; but I seldom saw any of them. Sometimes I'd glimpse one when I was foraging, but they never came near the auntring. In summer the Downriver Lame Man would get lonesome waiting for Aunt Sadne and would come lurking around, not very far from the auntring --not in the bush or down by the river, of course, where he might be mistaken for a rogue and stoned-- but out in the open, on the hillsides, where we could all see who he was. Hyuru and Didsu, Aunt Sadne's daughters, said she had had sex with him when she went out scouting the first time, and always had sex with him and never tried any of the other men of the settlement. She had told them, too, that the first child she bore was a boy, and she drowned it, because she didn't want to bring up a boy and send him away. They felt queer about that and so did I, but it wasn't an uncommon thing. One of the stories we learned was about a drowned boy who grew up underwater, and seized his mother when she came to bathe, and tried to hold her under till she too & owned; but she escaped. At any rate, after the Downriver Lame Man had sat around for several days on the hillsides, singing long songs and braiding and unbraiding his hair, which was long too, and shone black in the sun, Aunt Sadne always went off for a night or two with him, and came back looking cross and self-conscious. Aunt Noyit explained to me that Downriver Lame Man's songs were magic; not the usual bad magic, but what she called the great good spells. Aunt Sadne never could resist his spells. "But he hasn't half the charm of some men I've known," said Aunt Noyit, smiling reminiscently. Our diet, though excellent, was very low in fat, which Mother thought might explain the rather late onset of puberty; girls seldom menstreated before they were fifteen, and boys often weren't mature till they were considerably older than that. But the women began looking askance at boys as soon as they showed any signs at all of adolescence. First Aunt Hedimi, who was always grim, then Aunt Noyit, then even Aunt Sadne began to turn away from Borny, to leave him out, not answering when he spoke. "What are you doing playing with the children?" old Aunt Dnemi asked him so fiercely that he came home in tears. He was not quite fourteen. Sadne's younger daughter Hyuru was my soulmate, my best friend, you would say. Her elder sister Didsu, who was in the

singing circle now, came and talked to me one day, looking serious. "Borny is very handsome," she said. I agreed proudly. "Very big, very strong" she said, "stronger than I am." I agreed proudly again, and then I began to back away from her. "I'm not doing magic, Ren," she said. "Yes you are," I said. "I'll tell your mother!" Didsu shook her head. "I'm trying to speak truly. If my fear causes your fear, I can't help it. It has to be so. We talked about it in the singing circle. I don't like it," she said, and I knew she meant it; she had a soft face, soft eyes, she had always been the gentlest of us children. "I wish he could be a child," she said. "I wish I could. But we can't." "Go be a stupid old woman, then," I said, and ran away from her. I went to my secret place down by the river and cried. I took the holies out of my soulbag and arranged them. One holy -- it doesn't matter if I tell you -was a crystal that Borny had given me, clear at the top, cloudy purple at the base. I held it a long time and then I gave it back. I dug a hole under a boulder, and wrapped the holy in duhur leaves inside a square of cloth I tore out of my kilt, beautiful, fine cloth Hyuru had woven and sewn for me. I tore the square right from the front, where it would show. I gave the crystal back, and then sat a long time there near it. When I went home I said nothing of what Didsu had said. But Borny was very silent, and my mother had a worried look. "What have you done to your kilt, Ren?" she asked. I raised my head a little and did not answer; she started to speak again, and then did not. She had finally learned not to talk to a person who chose to be silent. Borny didn't have a soulmate, but he had been playing more and more often with the two boys nearest his age, Ednede who was a year or two older, a slight, quiet boy, and Bit who was only eleven, but boisterous and reckless. The three of them went off somewhere all the time. I hadn't paid much attention, partly because I was glad to be rid of Bit. Hyuru and I had been practicing being aware, and it was tiresome to always have to be aware of Bit yelling and jumping around. He never could leave anyone quiet, as if their quietness took something from him. His mother, Hedimi, had educated him, but she wasn't a good singer or story-teller like Sadne and Noyit, and Bit was too restless to listen even to them. Whenever he saw me and Hyuru trying to slow-walk or sitting being aware, he hung around making noise till we got mad and told him to go, and then he jeered, "Dumb girls!" I asked Borny what he and Bit and Ednede did, and he said, "Boy stuff." "Like what ?" "Practicing." "Being aware?" After a while he said, "No." "Practicing what, then?" "Wrestling. Getting strong. For the boygroup." He looked gloomy, but after a while he said, "Look," and showed me a knife he had hidden under his mattress. "Ednede says you have to have a knife, then nobody will challenge you. Isn't it a beauty?" It was metal, old metal from the People, shaped like a reed, pounded out and sharpened

down both edges, with a sharp point. A piece of polished flintshrub wood had been bored and fitted on the handle to protect the hand. "I found it in an empty man's-house," he said. "I made the wooden part." He brooded over it lovingly. Yet he did not keep it in his soulbag. "What do you do with it?" I asked, wondering why both edges were sharp, so you'd cut your hand if you used it. "Keep off attackers," he said. "Where was the empty man's-house?" "Way over across Rocky Top." "Can I go with you if you go back?" "No," he said, not unkindly, but absolutely. "What happened to the man? Did he die?" "There was a skull in the creek. We think he slipped and drowned." He didn't sound quite like Borny. There was something in his voice like a grown-up; melancholy; reserved. I had gone to him for reassurance, but came away more deeply anxious. I went to Mother and asked her, "what do they do in the boygroups?" "Perform natural selection," she said, not in my language but in hers, in a strained tone. I didn't always understand Hainish any more and had no idea what she meant, but the tone of her voice upset me; and to my horror I saw she had begun to cry silently. "We have to move, Serenity," she said -- she was still talking Hainish without realizing it. "There isn't any reason why a family can't move, is there? Women just move in and move out as they please. Nobody cares what anybody does. Nothing is anybody's business. Except hounding the boys out of town!" I understood most of what she said, but got her to say it in my language; and then I said, "But anywhere we went, Borny would be the same age, and size, and everything." "Then we'll leave," she said fiercely. "Go back to the ship." I drew away from her. I had never been afraid of her before: she had never used magic on me. A mother has great power, but there is nothing unnatural in it, unless it is used against the child's soul. Borny had no fear of her. He had his own magic. When she told him she intended leaving, he persuaded her out of it. He wanted to go join the boygroup, he said; he'd been wanting to for a year now. He didn't belong in the auntring any more, all women and girls and little kids. He wanted to go live with other boys.

Bit's older brother Yit was a member of the boygroup in the Four Rivers Territory, and would look after a boy from his auntring. And Ednede was getting ready to go. And Borny and Ednede and Bit had been talking to some men, recently. Men weren't all ignorant and crazy, the way Mother thought.

They didn't talk much, but they knew a lot. "What do they know?" Mother asked grimly "They know how to be men," Borny said. "It's what I'm going to be." "Not that kind of man -- not if I can help it! In Joy Born, you must remember the men on the ship, real men -- nothing like these poor, filthy hermits. I can't let you grow up thinking that that's what you have to be!" "They're not like that," Borny said.

"You ought to go talk to some of them, Mother." "Don't be naive," she said with an edgy laugh. "You know perfectly well that women don't go to men to talk." I knew she was wrong; all the women in the auntring knew all the settled men for three days' walk around. They did talk with them, when they were out foraging. They only kept away from the ones they didn't trust; and usually those men disappeared before long. Noyit had told me, "Their magic turns on them." She meant the other men drove them away or killed them. But I didn't say any of this, and Borny said only, "Well, Cave Cliff Man is really nice. And he took us to the place where I found those People things" -- some ancient artifacts that Mother had been excited about. "The men know things the women don't," Borny went on. "At least I could go to the boygroup for a while, maybe. I ought to. I could learn a lot! We don't have any solid information on them at all. All we know anything about is this auntring. I'll go and stay long enough to get material for our report. I can't ever come back to either the auntring or the boygroup once I leave them. I'll have to go to the ship, or else try to be a man. So let me have a real go at it, please, Mother?" "I don't know why you think you have to learn how to be a man," she said after a while. "You know how already." He really smiled then, and she put her arm around him. What about me? I thought. I don't even know what the ship is. I want to be here, where my soul is. I want to go on learning to be in the world. But I was afraid of Mother and Borny, who were both working magic, and so I said nothing and was still, as I had been taught. Ednede and Borny went off together. Noyit, Ednede's mother, was as glad as Mother was about their keeping company, though she said nothing. The evening before they left, the two boys went to every house in the auntring. It took a long time. The houses were each just within sight or hearing of one or two of the others, with bush and gardens and irrigation ditches and paths in between. In each house the mother and the children were waiting to say goodbye, only they didn't say it; my language has no word for hello or goodbye. They asked the boys in and gave them something to eat, something they could take with them on the way to the Territory. When the boys went to the door everybody in the household came and touched their hand or cheek. I remembered when Yit had gone around the auntring that way. I had cried then, because even though I didn't much like Yit, it seemed so strange for somebody to leave forever, like they were dying. This time I didn't cry; but I kept waking and waking again, until I heard Borny get up before the first light and pick up his things and leave quietly. I know Mother was awake too, but we did as we should do, and lay still while he left, and for a long time after. I have read her description of what she calls "An adolescent male leaves the Auntring: a vestigial survival of ceremony." She had wanted him

to put a radio in his soulbag and get in touch with her at least occasionally. He had been unwilling. "I want to do it fight, Mother. There's no use doing it if I don't do it right." "I simply can't handle not heating from you at all, Borny," she had said in Hainish. "But if the radio got broken or taken or something you'd worry a lot more, maybe with no reason at all." She finally agreed to wait half a year, till the first rains then she would go to a landmark, a huge rain near the fiver that marked the southern end of the Territory, and he would try and come to her there. "But only wait ten days," he said. "If I can't come, I can't." She agreed. She was like a mother with a little baby, I thought, saying yes to everything. That seemed wrong to me; but I thought Borny was fight. Nobody ever came back to their mother from boygroup. But Borny did. Summer was long, clear, beautiful. I was learning to starwatch; that is when you lie down outside on the open hills in the dry season at night, and find a certain star in the eastern sky, and watch it cross the sky till it sets. You can look away, of course, to rest your eyes, and doze, but you try to keep looking back at the star and the stars around it, until you feel the earth turning, until you become aware of how the stars and the world and the soul move together. After the certain star sets you sleep until dawn wakes you. Then as always you greet the sunrise with aware silence. I was very happy on the hills those warm great nights, those clear dawns. The first time or two Hyuru and I starwatched together, but after that we went alone, and it was better alone. I was coming back from such a night, along the narrow valley between Rocky Top and Over Home Hill in the first sunlight, when a man came crashing through the bush down onto the path and stood in front of me. "Don't be afraid," he said, "Listen!" He was heavyset, half naked; he stank. I stood still as a stick. He had said "Listen!" just as the aunts did, and I listened. "Your brother and his friend are all right.

Your mother shouldn't go there. Some of the boys are in a gang. They'd rape her. I and some others are killing the leaders. It takes a while. Your brother is with the other gang. He's all right. Tell her. Tell me what I said." I repeated it word for word, as I had learned to do when I listened. "Right. Good," he said, and took off up the steep slope on his short, powerful legs, and was gone. Mother would have gone to the Territory right then, but I told the man's message to Noyit, too, and she came to the porch of our house to speak to Mother. I listened to her, because she was telling things I didn't know well and Mother didn't know at all. Noyit was a small, mild woman, very like her son Ednede; she liked teaching and singing, so the children were always around her place. She saw Mother was getting ready for a journey. She said, "House on the Skyline Man says the boys are all right." When she saw Mother wasn't listening, she went on, she pretended to be

talking to me, because women don't teach women: "He says some of the men are breaking up the gang. They do that, when the boygroups get wicked. Sometimes there are magicians among them, leaders, older boys, even men who want to make a gang. The settled men will kill the magicians and make sure none of the boys gets hurt. When gangs come out of the Territories, nobody is safe. The settled men don't like that. They see to it that the auntring is safe. So your brother will be all right." My mother went on packing pigi-roots into her net. "A rape is a very, very bad thing for the settled men," said Noyit to me.

"It means the women won't come to them. If the boys raped some woman, probably the men would kill all the boys." My mother was finally listening. She did not go to the rendezvous with Borny, but all through the rainy season she was utterly miserable. She got sick, and old Dnemi sent Didsu over to dose her with gagberry syrup. She made notes while she was sick, lying on her mattress, about illnesses and medicines and how the older gifts had to look after sick women, since grown women did not enter one another's houses. She never stopped working and never stopped worrying about Borny. Late in the rainy season, when the warm wind had come and the yellow honey-flowers were in bloom on all the hills, the Golden World time, Noyit came by while Mother was working in the garden. "House on the Skyline Man says things are all right in the boygroup," she said, and went on. Mother began to realize then that although no adult ever entered another's house, and adults seldom spoke to one another, and men and women had only brief, often casual relationships, and men lived all their lives in real solitude, still there was a kind of community, a wide, thin, fine network of delicate and certain intention and restraint: a social order. Her reports to the ship were filled with this new understanding. But she still found Sorovian life impoverished, seeing these persons as mere survivors, poor fragments of the wreck of something great. "My dear," she said -- in Hainish; there is no way to say "my dear" in my language. She was speaking Hainish with me in the house so that I wouldn't forget it entirely.

-- "My dear, the explanation of an uncomprehended technology as magic is primitivism. It's not a criticism, merely a description." "But technology isn't magic," I said. "Yes, it is, in their minds; look at the story you just recorded. Before Time sorcerors who could fly in the air and undersea and underground in magic boxes!" "In metal boxes," I corrected. "In other words, airplanes, tunnels, submarines; a lost technology explained

as supernatural." "The boxes weren't magic," I said. "The people were. They were sorcerors. They used their power to get power over other persons. To live rightly a person has to keep away from magic."

"That's a cultural imperative, because a few thousand years ago uncontrolled technological expansion led to disaster. Exactly. There's a perfectly rational reason for the irrational taboo." I did not know what "rational" and "irrational" meant in my language; I could not find words for them. "Taboo" was the same as "poisonous." I listened to my mother because a daughter must learn from her mother, and my mother knew many, many things no other person knew; but my education was very difficult, sometimes. If only there were more stories and songs in her teaching, and not so many words, words that slipped away from me like water through a net! The Golden Time passed, and the beautiful summer; the Silver Time returned, when the mists lie in the valleys between the hills, before the rains begin; and the rains began, and fell long and slow and warm, day after day after day. We had heard nothing of Borny and Ednede for over a year. Then in the night the soft thrum of rain on the reed roof turned into a scratching at the door and a whisper, "Shh -- it's all right -- it's all right." We wakened the fire and crouched at it in the dark to talk. Borny had got tall and very thin, like a skeleton with the skin dried on it. A cut across his upper lip had drawn it up into a kind of snarl that bared his teeth, and he could not say p, b, or m. His voice was a man's voice. He huddled at the fire trying to get warmth into his bones. His clothes were wet rags. The knife hung on a cord around his neck. "It was all right," he kept saying. "I don't want to go on there, though." He would not tell us much about the year and a half in the boygroup, insisting that he would record a full description when he got to the ship. He did tell us what he would have to do if he stayed on Soro. He would have to go back to the Territory and hold his own among the older boys, by fear and sorcery, always proving his strength, until he was old enough to walk away -- that is, to leave the Territory and wander alone till he found a place where the men would let him settle. Ednede and another boy had paired, and were going to walk away together when the rains stopped. It was easier for a pair, he said, if their bond was sexual; so long as they offered no competition for women, settled men wouldn't challenge them. But a new man in the region anywhere within three days' walk of an auntring had to prove himself against the settled men there. "It would 'e three or four years of the same thing," he said, "challenging, fighting, always watching the others, on guard, showing how strong you are, staying alert all night, all day. To end up living alone your whole life. I can't do it." He looked at me. "I'ne not a 'erson," he said. "I want to go ho'e." "I'll radio the ship now," Mother said quietly, with infinite relief. "No," I said. Borny was watching Mother, and raised his hand when she turned to speak to me. "I'll go," he said. "She doesn't have to. Why should she?" Like me, he had learned not to use names without some reason to.

Mother looked from him to me and finally gave a kind of laugh. "I can't leave her here, Borny!" "Why should you go?" "Because I want to," she said. "I've had enough. More than enough. We've got a tremendous amount of material on the women, over seven years of it, and now you can fill the information gaps on the men's side. That's enough. It's time, past time, that we all got back to our own people. All of us." "I have no people," I said. "I don't belong to people. I am trying to be a person. Why do you want to take me away from my soul? You want me to do magic! I won't. I won't do magic. I won't speak your language. I won't go with you!" My mother was still not listening; she started to answer angrily. Borny put up his hand again, the way a woman does when she is going to sing, and she looked at him. "We can talk later," he said. "We can decide. I need to sleep." He hid in our house for two days while we decided what to do and how to do it. That was a miserable time. I stayed home as if I were sick so that I would not lie to the other persons, and Borny and Mother and I talked and talked.

Borny asked Mother to stay with me; I asked her to leave me with Sadne or Noyit, either of whom would certainly take me into their household. She refused. She was the mother and I the child and her power was sacred. She radioed the ship and arranged for a lander to pick us up in a barren area two days' walk from the auntring. We left at night, sneaking away. I carried nothing but my soulbag. We walked all next day, slept a little when it stopped raining, walked on and came to the desert. The ground was all lumps and hollows and caves, Before-Time ruins; the soil was tiny bits of glass and hard grains and fragments, the way it is in the deserts. Nothing grew there. We waited there. The sky broke open and a shining thing fell down and stood before us on the rocks, bigger than any house, though not as big as the ruins of the Before Time. My mother looked at me with a queer, vengeful smile. "Is it magic?" she said. And it was very hard for me not to think that it was. Yet I knew it was only a thing, and there is no magic in things, only in minds. I said nothing. I had not spoken since we left my home. I had resolved never to speak to anybody until I got home again; but I was still a child, used to listen and obey. In the ship, that utterly strange new world, I held out only for a few hours, and then began to cry and ask to go home. Please, please, can I go home now. Everyone on the ship was very kind to me. Even then I thought about what Borny had been through and what I was going through, comparing our ordeals. The difference seemed total. He had been alone, without food, without shelter, a frightened boy trying to survive among equally frightened rivals against the brutality of older youths intent on having and keeping power, which they saw as manhood. I was cared for, clothed, fed so richly I got sick, kept so

warm I felt feverish, guided, reasoned with, praised, befriended by citizens of a very great city, offered a share in their power, which they saw as humanity. He and I had both fallen among sorcerors. Both he and I could see the good in the people we were among, but neither he nor I could live with them. Borny told me he had spent many desolate nights in the Territory crouched in a fireless shelter, telling over the stories he had learned from the aunts, singing the songs in his head. I did the same thing every night on the ship. But I refused to tell the stories or sing to the people there. I would not speak my language, there. It was the only way I had to be silent. My mother was enraged, and for a long time unforgiving. "You owe your knowledge to our people," she said. I did not answer, because all I had to say was that they were not my people, that I had no people. I was a person. I had a language that I did not speak. I had my silence. I had nothing else. I went to school; there were children of different ages on the ship, like an auntring, and many of the adults taught us. I learned Ekumenical history and geography, mostly, and Mother gave me a report to learn about the history of Eleven-Soro, what my language calls the Before Time. I read that the cities of my world had been the greatest cities ever built on any world, covering two of the continents entirely, with small areas set aside for farming, there had been 120 billion people living in the cities, while the animals and the sea and the air and the dirt died, until the people began dying too. It was a hideous story. I was ashamed of it and wished nobody else on the ship or in the Ekumen knew about it. And yet, I thought, if they knew the stories I knew about the Before Time, they would understand how magic turns on itself, and that it must be so. After less than a year, Mother told us we were going to Hain. The ship's doctor and his clever machines had repaired Borny's lip; he and Mother had put all the information they had into the records; he was old enough to begin training for the Ekumenical Schools, as he wanted to do. I was not flourishing, and the doctor's machines were not able to repair me. I kept losing weight, I slept badly, I had terrible headaches. Almost as soon as we came aboard the ship, I had begun to menstruate; each time the cramps were agonizing. "This is no good, this ship life," she said. "You need to be outdoors. On a planet. On a civilized planet." "If I went to Hain," I said, "when I came back, the persons I know would all be dead hundreds of years ago." "Serenity," she said, "you must stop thinking in terms of Soro. We have left Sore. You must stop deluding and tormenting yourself, and look forward, not back. Your whole life is ahead of you. Hain is where you will learn to live it." I summoned up my courage and spoke in my own language: "I am not a child now. You have no power over me. I will not go. Go without me. You have no power over me!" Those are the words I had been taught to say to a

magician, a sorceror. I don't know if my mother fully understood them, but she did understand that I was deathly afraid of her, and it struck her into silence. After a long time she said in Hainish, "I agree. I have no power over you. But I have certain rights; the right of loyalty; of love." "Nothing is right that puts me in your power," I said, still in my language. She stared at me. "You are like one of them," she said. "You are one of them. You don't know what love is. You're closed into yourself like a rock. I should never have taken you there. People crouching in the ruins of a society -- brutal, rigid, ignorant, superstitious -- Each one in a terrible solitude -And I let them make you into one of them!" "You educated me," I said, and my voice began to tremble and my mouth to shake around the words, "and so does the school here, but my aunts educated me, and I want to finish my education." I was weeping, but I kept standing with my hands clenched. "I'm not a woman yet. I want to be a woman." "But Ren, you will be! -- ten times the woman you could ever be on Soro -- you must try to understand, to believe me -- " "You have no power over me," I said, shutting my eyes and putting my hands over my ears. She came to me then and held me, but I stood stiff, enduring her touch, until she let me go. The ship's crew had changed entirely while we were onplanet. The First Observers had gone on to other worlds; our backup was now a Gethenian archeologist named Arrem, a mild, watchful person, not young. Arrem had gone down onplanet only on the two desert continents, and welcomed the chance to talk with us, who had "lived with the living," as heshe said. I felt easy when I was with Artera, who was so unlike anybody else. Arrem was not a man -- I could not get used to having men around all the time-- yet not a woman; and so not exactly an adult, yet not a child: a person, alone, like me. Heshe did not know my language well, but always tried to talk it with me. When this crisis came, Arrem came to my mother and took counsel with her, suggesting that she let me go back down onplanet. Borny was in on some of these talks, and told me about them. "Arrem says if you go to Hain you'll probably die," he said. "Your soul will. Heshe says some of what we learned is like what they learn on Gethen, in their religion. That kind of stopped Mother from ranting about primitive superstition .... And Arrem says you could be useful to the Ekumen, if you stay and finish your education on Soro. You'll be an invaluable resource." Borny sniggered, and after a minute I did too. "They'll mine you like an asteroid," he said. Then he said, "You know, if you stay and I go, we'll be dead." That was how the young people of the ships said it, when one was going to cross the lightyears and the other was going to stay. Goodbye, we're dead. It was the truth. "I know," I said. I felt my throat get tight, and was afraid. I had never seen an adult at home cry, except when Sut's baby

died. Sut howled all night. Howled like a dog, Mother said, but I had never seen or heard a dog, I heard a woman terribly crying. I was afraid of sounding like that. "If I can go home, when I finish making my soul, who knows, I might come to Hain for a while," I said,

in Hainish. "Scouting?" Borny said in my language, and laughed, and made me laugh again. Nobody gets to keep a brother. I knew that. But Borny had come back from being dead to me, so I might come back from being dead to him; at least I could pretend I might. My mother came to a decision. She and I would stay on the ship for another year while Borny went to Hain. I would keep going to school; if at the end of the year I was still determined to go back onplanet, I could do so. With me or without me, she would go on to Hain then and join Borny. If I ever wanted to see them again, I could follow them. It was a compromise that satisfied no one, but it was the best we could do, and we all consented. When he left, Borny gave me his knife. After he left, I tried not to be sick. I worked hard at learning everything they taught me in the ship school, and I tried to teach Arrem how to be aware and how to avoid witchcraft. We did slow walking together in the ship's garden, and the first hour of the untrance movements from the Handdata of Karhide on Gethen.

We agreed that they were alike. The ship was staying in the Soro system not only because of my family, but because the crew was now mostly zoologists who had come to study a sea animal on Eleven-Soro, a kind of cephalopod that had mutated toward high intelligence, or maybe it already was highly intelligent; but there was a communication problem. "Almost as bad as with the local humans," said Steadiness, the zoologist who taught and teased us mercilessly. She took us down twice by lander to the uninhabited islands in the Northern Hemisphere where her station was. It was very strange to go down to my world and yet be a world away from my aunts and sisters and my soulmate; but I said nothing. I saw the great, pale, shy creature come slowly up out of the deep waters with a running ripple of colors along its long coiling tentacles and a ringing shimmer of sound, all so quick it was over before you could follow the colors or hear the tune. The zoologist's machine produced a pink glow and a mechanically speeded-up twitter, tinny and feeble in the immensity of the sea. The cephalopod patiently responded in its beautiful silvery shadowy language. "CP," Steadiness said to us, ironic -- Communication Problem. "We don't know what we're talking about." I said, "I learned something in my education here. In one of the songs, it says," and I hesitated, trying to translate it into Hainish, "it says, thinking is one way of doing and words are one way of thinking." Steadiness stared at me, in disapproval I thought, but probably only because I had never said anything to her before except "Yes." Finally

she said, "Are you suggesting that it doesn't speak in words?" "Maybe it's not speaking at all. Maybe it's thinking." Steadiness stared at me some more and then said, "Thank you." She looked as if she too might be thinking. I wished I could sink into the water, the way the cephalopod was doing. The other young people on the ship were friendly and mannerly. Those are words that have no translation in my language. I was unfriendly and unmannerly, and they let me be. I was grateful. But there was no place to be alone on the ship. Of course we each had a room; though small, the Heyho was a Hainish-built explorer, designed to give its people room and privacy and comfort and variety and beauty while they hung around in a solar system for years on end. But it was designed. It was all human-made -- everything was human. I had much more privacy than I had ever had at home in our one-room house; yet there I had been free and here I was in a trap. I felt the pressure of people all around me, all the time. People around me, people with me, people pressing on me, pressing me to be one of them, to be one of them, one of the people. How could I make my soul? I could barely cling to it. I was in terror that I would lose it altogether. One of the rocks in my soulbag, a little ugly gray rock that I had picked up on a certain day in a certain place in the hills above the river in the Silver Time, a little piece of my world, that became my world. Every night I took it out and held it in my hand while I lay in bed waiting to sleep, thinking of the sunlight on the hills above the river, listening to the soft hushing of the ship's systems, like a mechanical sea. The doctor hopefully fed me various tonics. Mother and I ate breakfast together every morning. She kept at work, making our notes from all the years on Eleven-Soro into her report to the Ekumen, but I knew the work did not go well. Her soul was in as much danger as mine was. "You will never give in, will you, Ren?" she said to me one morning out of the silence of our breakfast. I had not intended the silence as a message. I had only rested in it. "Mother, I want to go home and you want to go home," I said. "Can't we?" Her expression was strange for a moment, while she misunderstood me; then it cleared to grief, defeat, relief. "Will we be dead?" she asked me, her mouth twisting. "I don't know. I have to make my soul. Then I can know if I can come." "You know I can't come back. It's up to you." "I know. Go see Borny," I said. "Go home. Here we're both dying." Then noises began to come out of me, sobbing, howling. Mother was crying. She came to me and held me, and I could hold my mother, cling to her and cry with her, because her spell was broken. From the lander approaching I saw the oceans of Eleven-Soro, and in the greatness of my joy I thought that when I was grown and went out alone I would go to the sea shore and watch the sea-beasts shimmering their colors and tunes till I knew what they

were thinking. I would listen, I would learn, till my soul was as large as the shining world. The scarred barrens whirled beneath us, rains as wide as the continent, endless desolations. We touched down. I had my soulbag, and Borny's knife around my neck on its string a communicator implant behind my right earlobe, and a medicine kit Mother had made for me. "No use dying of an infected finger, after all," she had said. The people on the lander said good-bye, but I forgot to. I set off out of the desert, home. It was summer; the night was short and warm; I walked most of it. I got to the auntring about the middle of the second day. I went to my house cautiously, in case somebody had moved in while I was gone; but it was just as we had left it. The mattresses were moldy, and I put them and the bedding out in the sun, and started going over the garden to see what had kept growing by itself. The pigi had got small and seedy, but there were some good roots. A little boy came by and stared; he had to be Migi's baby. After a while Hyuru came by. She squatted down near me in the garden in the sunshine. I smiled when I saw her, and she smiled, but it took us a while to find something to say. "Your mother didn't come back," she said. "She's dead," I said. "I'm sorry," Hyuru said. She watched me dig up another root. "Will you come to the singing circle?" she asked. I nodded. She smiled again. With her rosebrown skin and wide-set eyes, Hyuru had become very beautiful, but her smile was exactly the same as when we were little girls. "Hi, ya!" she sighed in deep contentment, lying down on the dirt with her chin on her arms. "This is good!" I went on blissfully digging. That year and the next two, I was in the singing circle with Hyuru and two other gifts. Didsu still came to it often, and Han, a woman who settled in our auntring to have her first baby, joined it too. In the singing circle the older gifts pass around the stories, songs, knowledge they learned from their own mother, and young women who have lived in other auntrings teach what they learned there; so women make each other's souls, learning how to make their children's souls. Han lived in the house where old Dnemi had died. Nobody in the auntring except Sut's baby had died while my family lived there. My mother had complained that she didn't have any data on death and burial. Sut had gone away with her dead baby and never came back, and nobody talked about it. I think that turned my mother against the others more than anything else. She was angry and ashamed that she could not go and try to comfort Sut and that nobody else did. "It is not human," she said. "It is pure animal behavior. Nothing could be clearer evidence that this is a broken culture -- not a society, but the remains of one. A terrible, an appalling poverty." I don't know if Dnemi's death would have changed her mind. Dnemi was dying for a long time, of kidney failure I think; she turned a kind of dark orange color, jaundice. While

she could get around, nobody helped her. When she didn't come out of her house for a day or two, the women would send the children in with water and a little food and firewood. It went on so through the winter; then one morning little Rashi told his mother Aunt Dnemi was "staring." Several of the women went to Dnemi's house, and entered it for the first and last time. They sent for all the girls in the singing circle, so that we could learn what to do. We took turns sitting by the body or in the porch of the house, singing soft songs, child-songs, giving the soul a day and a night to leave the body and the house; then the older women wrapped the body in the bedding, strapped it on a kind of litter, and set off with it toward the barren lands. There it would be given back, under a rock cairn or inside one of the ruins of the ancient city. "Those are the lands of the dead," Sadne said. "What dies stays there." Hah settled down in that house a year later. When her baby began to be born she asked Didsu to help her, and Hyuru and I stayed in the porch and watched, so that we could learn. It was a wonderful thing to see, and quite altered the course of my thinking, and Hyuru's too. Hyuru said, "I'd like to do that!" I said nothing, but thought, So do I, but not for a long time, because once you have a child you're never alone. And though it is of the others, of relationships, that I write, the heart of my life has been my being alone. I think there is no way to write about being alone. To write is to tell something to somebody, to communicate to others.

CP, as Steadiness would say. Solitude is non-communication, the absence of others, the presence of a self sufficient to itself. A woman's solitude in the auntring is, of course, based firmly on the presence of others at a little distance. It is a contingent, and therefore human, solitude. The settled men are connected as stringently to the women, though not to one another; the settlement is an integral though distant element of the auntring. Even a scouting woman is part of the society -- a moving part, connecting the settled parts. Only the isolation of a woman or man who chooses to live outside the settlements is absolute. They are outside the network altogether. There are worlds where such persons are called saints, holy people. Since isolation is a sure way to prevent magic, on my world the assumption is that they are sorcerors, outcast by others or by their own will, their conscience. I knew I was strong with magic, how could I help it? and I began to long to get away.

It would be so much easier and safer to be alone. But at the same time, and increasingly, I wanted to know something about the great harmless magic, the spells cast between men and women. I preferred foraging to gardening, and was out on the hills a good deal; and these days, instead of keeping away from the man's-houses, I wandered by them, and looked at them, and looked at the men if they were outside.

The men looked back. Downriver Lame Man's long, shining hair was getting a little white in it now, but when he sat singing his long, long songs I found myself sitting down and listening, as if my legs had lost their bones. He was very handsome. So was the man I remembered as a boy named Tret in the auntring, when I was little, Behyu's son. He had come back from the boygroup and from wandering, and had built a house and made a fine garden in the valley of Red Stone Creek. He had a big nose and big eyes, long arms and legs, long hands; he moved very quietly, almost like Arrem doing the untrance. I went often to pick lowberries in Red Stone Creek valley. He came along the path and spoke. "You were Borny's sister," he said. He had a low voice, quiet. "He's dead," I said. Red Stone Man nodded. "That's his knife." In my world, I had never talked with a man. I felt extremely strange. I kept picking berries. "You're picking green ones," Red Stone Man said. His soft, smiling voice made my legs lose their bones again. "I think nobody's touched you," he said. "I'd touch you gently. I think about it, about you, ever since you came by here early in the summer. Look, here's a bush full of ripe ones. Those are green. Come over here." I came closer to him, to the bush of ripe berries. When I was on the ship, Arrem told me that many languages have a single word for sexual desire and the bond between mother and child and the bond between soulmates and the feeling for one's home and worship of the sacred; they are all called love. There is no word that great in my language. Maybe my mother is right, and human greatness perished in my world with the people of the Before Time, leaving only small, poor, broken things and thoughts. In my language, love is many different words. I learned one of them with Red Stone Man. We sang it together to each other. We made a brush house on a little cove of the creek, and neglected our gardens, but gathered many, many sweet berries. Mother had put a lifetime's worth of nonconceptives in the little medicine kit. She had no faith in Sorovian herbals. I did, and they worked. But when a year or so later, in the Golden Time, I decided to go out scouting, I thought I might go places where the right herbs were scarce; and so I stuck the little noncon jewel on the back of my left earlobe. Then I wished I hadn't, because it seemed like witchcraft. Then I told myself I was being superstitious; the noncon wasn't any more witchcraft than the herbs were, it just worked longer. I had promised my mother in my soul that I would never be superstitious. The skin grew over the noncon, and I took my soulbag and Borny's knife and the medicine kit, and set off across the world. I had told Hyuru and Red Stone Man I would be leaving. Hyuru and I sang and talked together all one night down by the fiver. Red Stone Man said in his soft voice, "Why do you want to go?" and I said, "To get away from your magic, sorcerer," which was true in part. If I kept

going to him I might always go to him. I wanted to give my soul and body a larger world to be in. Now to tell of my scouting years is more difficult than ever. CP! A woman scouting is entirely alone, unless she chooses to ask a settled man for sex, or camps in an auntring for a while to sing and listen with the singing circle. If she goes anywhere near the territory of a boygroup, she is in danger; and if she comes on a rogue she is in danger; and if she hurts herself or gets into polluted country, she is in danger. She has no responsibility except to herself, and so much freedom is very dangerous. In my fight earlobe was the tiny communicator; every forty days, as I had promised, I sent a signal to the ship that meant "all well." If I wanted to leave, I would send another signal. I could have called for the lander to rescue me from a bad situation, but though I was in bad situations a couple of times I never thought of using it. My signal was the mere fulfillment of a promise to my mother and her people, the network I was no longer part of, a meaningless communication. Life in the auntring, or for a settled man, is repetitive, as I said; and so it can be dull. Nothing new happens. The mind always wants new happenings. So for the young soul there is wandering and scouting, travel, danger, change. But of course travel and danger and change have their own dullness. It is finally always the same otherness over again; another hill, another fiver, another man, another day. The feet begin to turn in a long, long circle. The body begins to think of what it learned back home, when it learned to be still. To be aware. To be aware of the grain of dust beneath the sole of the foot, and the skin of the sole of the foot, and the touch and scent of the air on the cheek, and the fall and motion of the light across the air, and the color of the grass on the high hill across the fiver, and the thoughts of the body, of the soul, the shimmer and ripple of colors and sounds in the clear darkness of the depths, endlessly moving, endlessly changing, endlessly new. So at last I came back home. I had been gone about four years. Hyuru had moved into my old house when she left her mother's house. She had not gone scouting, but had taken to going to Red Stone Creek Valley; and she was pregnant. I was glad to see her living there. The only house empty was an old half-ruined one too close to Hedimi's. I decided to make a new house. I dug out the circle as deep as my chest; the digging took most of the summer. I cut the sticks, braced and wove them, and then daubed the framework solidly with mud inside and out. I remembered when I had done that with my mother long long ago, and how she had said, "That's right. That's good." I left the roof open, and the hot sun of late summer baked the mud into clay. Before the rains came, I thatched the house with reeds, a triple thatching, for I'd had enough of being wet all winter. My auntring was more a string than a ring stretching along the north bank of the river

for about three kilos; my house lengthened the string a good bit, upstream from all the others. I could just see the smoke from Hyuru's fireplace. I dug it into a sunny slope with good drainage. It is still a good house. I settled down.

Some of my time went to gathering and gardening and mending and all the dull, repetitive actions of primitive life, and some went to singing and thinking the songs and stories I had learned here at home and while scouting and the things I had learned on the ship, also. Soon enough I found why women are glad to have children come to listen to them, for songs and stories are meant to be heard, listened to. "Listen!" I would say to the children. The children of the auntring came and went, like the little fish in the river, one or two or five of them, little ones, big ones. When they came, I sang or told stories to them. When they left, I went on in silence. Sometimes I joined the singing circle to give what I had learned traveling to the older girls. And that was all I did; except that I worked, always, to be aware of all I did. By solitude the soul escapes from doing or suffering magic; it escapes from dullness, from boredom, by being aware. Nothing is boring if you are aware of it. It may be irritating but it is not boring. If it is pleasant the pleasure will not fail so long as you are aware of it. Being aware is the hardest work the soul can do, I think. I helped Hyuru have her baby, a girl, and played with the baby. Then after a couple of years I took the noncon out of my left earlobe. Since it left a little hole, I made the hole go all the way through with a burnt needle, and when it healed I hung in it a tiny jewel I had found in a rain when I was scouting. I had seen a man on the ship with a jewel hung in his ear that way. I wore it when I went out foraging. I kept clear of Red Stone Valley. The man there behaved as if he had a claim on me, a right to me. I liked him still, but I did not like that smell of magic about him, his imagination of power over me. I went up into the hills, northward. Apair of young men had settled in old North House about the time I came home. Often boys got through boygroup by pairing, and often they stayed paired when they left the Territory. It helped their chances of survival. Some of them were sexually paired, others weren't; some stayed paired, others didn't. One of this pair had gone off with another man last summer. The one that stayed wasn't a handsome man, but I had noticed him. He had a kind of solidness I liked. His body and hands were short and strong. I had courted him a little, but he was very shy. This day, a day in the Silver Time when the mist lay on the river, he saw the jewel swinging in my ear, and his eyes widened. "It's pretty, isn't it?" I said. He nodded. "I wore it to make you look at me," I said. He was so shy that I finally said, "If you only like sex with men, you know, just tell me." I really was not sure. "Oh, no," he said, "no. No." He stammered and then bolted back down

the path. But he looked back; and I followed him slowly, still not certain whether he wanted me or wanted to be rid of me. He waited for me in front of a little house in a grove of redroot, a lovely little bower, all leaves outside, so that you would walk within arm's length of it and not see it. Inside he had laid sweet grass, deep and dry and soft, smelling of summer. I went in, crawling because the door was very low, and sat in the summer-smelling grass. He stood outside. "Come in," I said, and he came in very slowly. "I made it for you," he said. "Now make a child for me," I said. And we did that; maybe that day, maybe another. Now I will tell you why after all these years I called the ship, not knowing even if it was still there in the space between the planets, asking for the lander to meet me in the barren land. When my daughter was born, that was my heart's desire and the fulfillment of my soul. When my son was born, last year, I knew there is no fulfillment. He will grow toward manhood, and go, and fight and endure, and live or die as a man must. My daughter, whose name is Yedneke, Leaf, like my mother, will grow to womanhood and go or stay as she chooses. I

will live alone. This is as it should be, and my desire. But I am of two worlds; I am a person of this world, and a woman of my mother's people. I owe my knowledge to the children of her people. So I asked the lander to come, and spoke to the people on it. They gave me my mother's report to read, and I have written my story in their machine, making a record for those who want to learn one of the ways to make a soul. To them, to the children I say: Listen! Avoid magic! Be aware!

URSULA K. LEGUIN

THE BIRTHDAY OF THE WORLD

TAZU WAS HAVING A TANTRUM, because he was three. After the birthday of the world, tomorrow, he would be four and would not have tantrums.

He had left off screaming and kicking and was turning blue from holding his breath. He lay on the ground stiff as a corpse, but when Haghag stepped over him as if he wasn't there, he tried to bite her foot.

"This is an animal or a baby," Haghag said, "not a person." She glanced may-I-speak-to-you and I glanced yes. "Which does God's daughter think it is," she asked, "an animal or a baby?"

"An animal. Babies suck, animals bite," I said. All the servants of God laughed and tittered, except the new barbarian, Ruaway, who never smiled. Haghag said,

"God's daughter must be right. Maybe somebody ought to put the animal outside.

An animal shouldn't be in the holy house."

"I'm not an aminal!" Tazu screamed, getting up, his fists clenched

and his eyes as red as rubies. "I'm God's son!"

Maybe," Haghag said, looking him over. "This doesn't look so much like an animal now. Do you think this might be God's son?" she asked the holy women and men, and they all nodded their bodies, except the wild one, who stared and said nothing.

"I am, I am God's son!" Tazu shouted. "Not a baby! Arzi is the baby!" Then he burst into tears and ran to me, and I hugged him and began crying because he was crying. We cried till Haghag took us both on her lap and said it was time to stop crying, because God Herself was coming. So we stopped, and the bodyservants wiped the tears and snot from our faces and combed our hair, and Lady Clouds brought our gold hats, which we put on to see God Herself.

She came with her mother, who used to be God Herself a long time ago, and the new baby, Arzi, on a big pillow carried by the idiot. The idiot was a son of God too. There were seven of us: Omimo, who was fourteen and had gone to live with the army, then the idiot, who was twelve, and had a big round head and small eyes and liked to play with Tazu and the baby, then Goiz, and another Goiz, who were called that because they had died and were in the ash-house where they ate spirit food, then me and Tazu, who would get married and be God, and then Babam Arzi, Lord Seven. I was important because I was the only daughter of God. If Tazu died I could marry Arzi, but if I died everything would be bad and difficult, Haghag said. They would have to act as if Lady Clouds' daughter Lady Sweetness was God's daughter and marry her to Tazu, but the world would know the difference. So my mother greeted me first, and Tazu second. We knelt and clasped our hands and touched our foreheads to our thumbs. Then we stood up, and God asked me what I had learned that day.

I told her what words I had learned to read and write.

"Very good," God said. "And what have you to ask, daughter?"

"I have nothing to ask, I thank you, Lady Mother," I said. Then I remembered I did have a question, but it was too late.

"And you, Tazu? What have you learned this day?"

"I tried to bite Haghag"

"Did you learn that was a good thing to do, or a bad thing?"

"Bad," Tazu said, but he smiled, and so did God, and Haghag laughed.

"And what have you to ask, son?"

"Can I have a new bath maid because Kig washes my head too hard?"

"If you have a new bath maid where will Kig go?" "Away."

"This is her house. What if you asked Kig to wash your head more gently?"

Tazu looked unhappy, but God said, "Ask her, son." Tazu

mumbled something to Kig, who dropped on her knees and thumbed her forehead. But she grinned the whole time. Her fearlessness made me envious. I whispered to Haghag, "If I forgot a question to ask can I ask if I can ask it?"

"Maybe," said Haghag, and thumbed her forehead to God for permission to speak, and when God nodded, Haghag said, "The daughter of God asks if she may ask a question."

"Better to do a thing at the time for doing it," God said, "but you may ask, daughter."

I rushed into the question, forgetting to thank her. "I wanted to know why I can't marry Tazu and Omimo both, because they're both my brothers."

Everybody looked at God, and seeing her smile a little, they all laughed, some of them loudly. My ears burned and my heart thumped.

"Do you want to marry all your brothers, child?" "No, only Tazu and Omimo."

"Is Tazu not enough?"

Again they all laughed, especially the men. I saw Ruaway staring at us as if she thought we were all crazy.

"Yes, Lady Mother, but Omimo is older and bigger."

Now the laughter was even louder, but I had stopped caring, since God was not displeased. She looked at me thoughtfully and said, "Understand, my daughter.

Our eldest son will be a soldier. That's his road. He'll serve God, fighting barbarians and rebels. The day he was born, a tidal wave destroyed the towns of the outer coast. So his name is Babam Omimo, Lord Drowning. Disaster serves God, but is not God."

I knew that was the end of the answer, and thumbed my forehead. I kept thinking about it after God left. It explained many things. All the same, even if he had been born with a bad omen, Omimo was handsome, and nearly a man, and Tazu was a baby that had tantrums. I was glad it would be a long time till we were married.

I remember that birthday because of the question I asked. I remember another birthday because of Ruaway. It must have been a year or two later. I ran into the water room to piss and saw her hunched up next to the water tank, almost hidden.

"What are you doing there?" I said, loud and hard, because I was startled. Ruaway shrank and said nothing. I saw her clothes were torn and there was blood dried in her hair.

"You tore your clothes," I said.

When she didn't answer, I lost patience and shouted, "Answer me! Why don't you talk?"

"Have mercy," Ruaway whispered so low I had to guess what she said.

"You talk all wrong when you do talk. What's wrong with you? Are they animals where you come from? You talk like an animal, brr-grr, grr-gra! Are you an idiot?"

When Ruaway said nothing, I pushed her with my foot. She looked up then and I saw not fear but killing in her eyes. That made me like her better. I hated people who were afraid of me. "Talk!" I said. "Nobody can hurt you. God the Father put his penis in you when he was conquering your country, so you're a holy woman. Lady Clouds told me. So what are you hiding for?"

Ruaway showed her teeth and said, "Can hurt me." She showed me places on her head where there was dried blood and fresh blood. Her arms were darkened with bruises.

"Who hurt you?"

"Holy women," she said with a snarl.

"Kig? Omery? Lady Sweetness?"

She nodded her body at each name.

"They're shit," I said. "I'11 tell God Herself."

"No tell," Ruaway whispered. "Poison."

I thought about it and understood. The girls hurt her because she was a stranger, powerless. But if she got them in trouble they would cripple or kill her. Most of the barbarian holy women in our house were lame, or blind, or had had root-poison put in their food so that their skin was scabbed with purplish sores.

"Why don't you talk right, Ruaway?"

She said nothing.

"You still don't know how to talk?"

She looked up at me and suddenly said a whole long speech I did not understand. "How I talk," she said at the end, still looking at me, right in the eyes. That

was nice; I liked it. Mostly I saw only eyelids. Ruaway's eyes were clear and beautiful, though her face was dirty and blood-smeared.

"But it doesn't mean anything," I said.

"Not here."

"Where does it mean anything?"

Ruaway said some more gra-gra and then said, "My people."

"Your people are Teghs. They fight God and get beaten."

"Maybe," Ruaway said, sounding like Haghag. Her eyes looked into mine again, without killing in them but without fear. Nobody looked at me, except Haghag and Tazu and of course God. Everybody else put their forehead on their thumbs so I couldn't tell what they were thinking. I wanted to keep Ruaway with me, but if I favored her, Kig and the others would torment and hurt her. I remembered that when Lord Festival began sleeping with Lady Pin, the men who had insulted Lady Pin became oily and sugary with her and the bodymaids

stopped stealing her earrings. I said, "Sleep with me tonight," to Ruaway.

She looked stupid.

"But wash first," I said.

She still looked stupid.

"I don't have a penis!" I said, impatient with her. "If we sleep together Kig will be afraid to touch you."

After a while Ruaway reached out and took my hand and put her forehead against the back of it. It was like thumbing the forehead only it took two people to do it. I liked that. Ruaway's hand was warm, and I could feel the feather of her eyelashes on my hand.

"Tonight," I said. "You understand?" I had understood that Ruaway didn't always understand. Ruaway nodded her body, and I ran off.

I knew nobody could stop me from doing anything, being God's only daughter, but there was nothing I could do except what I was supposed to do, because everybody in the house of God knew everything I did. If sleeping with Ruaway was a thing I wasn't supposed to do, I couldn't do it. Haghag would tell me. I went to her and asked her.

Haghag scowled. "Why do you want that woman in your bed? She's a dirty barbarian. She has lice. She can't even talk."

Haghag was saying yes. She was jealous. I came and stroked her hand and said, "When I'm God I'll give you a room full of gold and jewels and dragon crests."

"You are my gold and jewels, little holy daughter," Haghag said.

Haghag was only a common person, but all the holy men and women in God's house, relatives of God or people touched by God, had to do what Haghag said. The nurse of God's children was always a common person, chosen by God Herself. Haghag had been chosen to be Omimo's nurse when her own children were grown up, so when I first remember her she was quite old. She was always the same, with strong hands and a soft voice, saying, "Maybe." She liked to laugh and eat. We were in her heart, and she was in mine. I thought I was her favorite, but when I told her so she said, "After Didi." Didi is what the idiot called himself. I asked her why he was deepest in her heart and she said, "Because he's foolish. And you because you're wise," she said, laughing at me because I was jealous of Lord Idiot.

So now I said, "You fill my heart," and she, knowing it, said hmph.

I think I was eight that year. Ruaway had been thirteen when God the Father put his penis into her after killing her father and mother in the war with her people. That made her sacred, so she had to come live in God's house. If she had conceived, the priests would have

strangled her after she had the baby, and the baby would have been nursed by a common woman for two years and then brought back to God's house and trained to be a holy woman, a servant of God. Most of the bodyservants were God's bastards. Such people were holy, but had no title.

Lords and ladies were God's relations, descendants of the ancestors of God.

God's children were called lord and lady too, except the two who were betrothed.

We were just called Tazu and Ze until we became God. My name is what the divine mother is called, the name of the sacred plant that feeds the people of God.

Tazu means "great root," because when he was being born our father drinking smoke in the childbirth rituals saw a big tree blown over by a storm, and its roots held thousands of jewels in their fingers.

When God saw things in the shrine or in sleep, with the eyes in the back of their head, they told the dream priests. The priests would ponder these sights and say whether the oracle foretold what would happen or told what should be done or not done. But never had the priests seen the same things God saw, together with God, until the birthday of the world that made me fourteen years old and Tazu eleven.

Now, in these years, when the sun stands still over Mount Kanaghadwa people still call it the birthday of the world and count themselves a year older, but they no longer know and do all the rituals and ceremonies, the dances and songs, the blessings; and there is no feasting in the streets, now.

All my life used to be rituals, ceremonies, dances, songs, blessings, lessons, feasts, and rules. I knew and I know now on which day of God's year the first perfect ear of ze is to be brought by an angel from the ancient field up by Wadana where God set the first seed of the ze. I knew and know whose hand is to thresh it, and whose hand is to grind the grain, and whose lips are to taste the meal, at what hour, in what room of the house of God, with what priests officiating. There were a thousand rules, but they only seem complicated when I write them here. We knew them and followed them and only thought about them when we were learning them or when they were broken.

I had slept all these years with Ruaway in my bed. She was warm and comfortable. When she began to sleep with me I stopped having bad sights at night as I used to do, seeing huge white clouds whirling in the dark, and toothed mouths of animals, and strange faces that came and changed themselves. When Kig and the other ill-natured holy people saw Ruaway stay in my bedroom with me every night,

they dared not lay a finger or a breath on her. Nobody was allowed to touch me except my family and Haghag and the bodyservants, unless I told them to. And after I was ten, the punishment for touching me was death. All the rules had their uses.

The feast after the birthday of the world used to go on for four days and nights. All the storehouses were open and people could take what they needed. The servants of God served out food and beer in the streets and squares of the city of God and every town and village of God's country, and common people and holy people ate together. The lords and ladies and God's sons went down into the streets to join the feast; only God and I did not. God came out on the balcony of the house to hear the histories and see the dances, and I came with them.

Singing and dancing priests entertained everyone in the Glittering Square, and drumming priests, and story priests, and history priests. Priests were common people, but what they did was holy.

But before the feast, there were many days of rituals, and on the day itself, as the sun stopped above the right shoulder of Kanaghadwa, God Himself danced the Dance that Turns, to bring the year back round.

He wore a gold belt and the gold sun mask, and danced in front of our house on the Glittering Square, which is paved with stones full of mica that flash and sparkle in the sunlight. We children were on the long south balcony to see God dance.

Just as the dance was ending a cloud came across the sun as it stood still over the right shoulder of the mountain, one cloud in the clear blue summer sky. Everybody looked up as the light dimmed. The glittering died out of the stones. All the people in the city made a sound, "Oh," drawing breath. God Himself did not look up, but his step faltered.

He made the last turns of the dance and went into the ash-house, where all the Goiz are in the walls, with the bowls where their food is burned in front of each of them, full of ashes.

There the dream priests were waiting for him, and God Herself had lighted the herbs to make the smoke to drink. The oracle of the birthday was the most important one of the year. Everybody waited in the squares and streets and on the balconies for the priests to come out and tell what God Himself had seen over his shoulder and interpret it to guide us in the new year. After that the feasting would begin.

Usually it took till evening or night for the smoke to bring the seeing and for God to tell it to the priests and for them to interpret it and tell us. People were settling down to wait indoors or in shady places, for when the cloud had passed it became very hot. Tazu and Arzi and the idiot and I stayed out on the long balcony with Haghag

and some of the lords and ladies, and Omimo, who had come back from the army for the birthday.

He was a grown man now, tall and strong. After the birthday he was going east to command the army making war on the Tegh and Chasi peoples. He had hardened the skin of his body the way soldiers did by rubbing it with stones and herbs until it was thick and tough as the leather of a ground-dragon, almost black, with a dull shine. He was handsome, but I was glad now that I was to marry Tazu not him. An ugly man looked out of his eyes.

He made us watch him cut his arm with his knife to show how the thick skin was cut deep yet did not bleed. He kept saying he was going to cut Tazu's arm to show how quickly Tazu would bleed. He boasted about being a general and slaughtering barbarians. He said things like, "I'll walk across the river on their corpses. I'll drive them into the jungles and burn the jungles down." He said the Tegh people were so stupid they called a flying lizard God. He said that they let their women fight in wars, which was such an evil thing that when he captured such women he would cut open their bellies and trample their wombs.

I said nothing. I knew Ruaway's mother had been killed fighting beside her father. They had led a small army which God Himself had easily defeated. God made war on the barbarians not to kill them but to make them people of God, serving and sharing like all people in God's country. I knew no other good reason for war. Certainly Omimo's reasons were not good.

Since Ruaway slept with me she had learned to speak well, and also I learned some words of the way she talked. One of them was techeg. Words like it are: companion, fights-beside-me, countrywoman or countryman, desired, lover, known-a-long-time; of all our words the one most like techeg is our word in-my-heart. Their name Tegh was the same word as techeg; it meant they were all in one another's heart. Ruaway and I were in each other's heart. We were techeg.

Ruaway and I were silent when Omimo said, "The Tegh are filthy insects. I'll crush them."

"Ogga! ogga! ogga!" the idiot said, imitating Omimo's boastful voice. I burst out laughing. In that moment, as I laughed at my brother, the doors of the ash house flew open wide and all the priests hurried out, not in procession with music, but in a crowd, wild, disordered, crying out aloud

"The house burns and falls!"

"The world dies!"

"God is blind!"

There was a moment of terrible silence in the city and then people began to wail and call out in the streets and from the

balconies.

God came out of the ash house, Herself first, leading Himself, who walked as if drunk and sun-dazzled, as people walk after drinking smoke. God came among the

staggering, crying priests and silenced them. Then she said, "Hear what I have seen coming behind me, my people!"

In the silence he began speaking in a weak voice. We could not hear all his words, but she said them again in a clear voice after he said them: "God's house falls down to the ground burning, but is not consumed. It stands by the river.

God is white as snow. God's face has one eye in the center. The great stone roads are broken. War is in the east and north. Famine is in the west and south.

The world dies."

He put his face in his hands and wept aloud. She said to the priests, "Say what God has seen!"

They repeated the words God had said.

She said, "Go tell these words in the quarters of the city and to God's angels, and let the angels go out into all the country to tell the people what God has seen."

The priests put their foreheads to their thumbs and obeyed.

When Lord Idiot saw God weeping, he became so distressed and frightened that he pissed, making a pool on the balcony. Haghag, terribly upset, scolded and slapped him. He roared and sobbed. Omimo shouted that a foul woman who struck God's son should be put to death. Haghag fell on her face in Lord Idiot's pool

of urine to beg mercy. I told her to get up and be forgiven. I said, "I am God's daughter and I forgive you," and I looked at Omimo with eyes that told him he could not speak. He did not speak.

When I think of that day, the day the world began dying, I think of the trembling old woman standing there sodden with urine, while the people down in the square looked up at us.

Lady Clouds sent Lord Idiot off with Haghag to be bathed, and some of the lords took Tazu and Arzi off to lead the feasting in the city streets. Arzi was crying and Tazu was keeping from crying. Omimo and I stayed among the holy people on the balcony, watching what happened down in Glittering Square. God had gone back into the ash house, and the angels had gathered to repeat together their message, which they would carry word for word, relay by relay, to every town and village and farm of God's country, running day and night on the great stone roads.

All that was as it should be; but the message the angels carried was not as it should be.

Sometimes when the smoke is thick and strong the priests also see

things over their shoulder as God does. These are lesser oracles. But never before had they all seen the same thing God saw, speaking the same words God spoke.

And they had not interpreted or explained the words. There was no guidance in them. They brought no understanding, only fear.

But Omimo was excited: "War in the east and north," he said. "My war!" He looked at me, no longer sneering or sullen, but right at me, eye in eye, the way Ruaway looked at me. He smiled. "Maybe the idiots and crybabies will die," he said.

"Maybe you and I will be God." He spoke low, standing close to me, so no one else heard. My heart gave a great leap. I said nothing.

SOON AFTER that birthday, Omimo went back to lead the army on the eastern border.

All year long people waited for our house, God's house in the center of the city, to be struck by lightning, though not destroyed, since that is how the priests interpreted the oracle once they had time to talk and think about it.

When the seasons went on and there was no lightning or fire, they said the oracle meant that the sun shining on the gold and copper roof-gutters was the unconsuming fire, and that if there was an earthquake the house would stand.

The words about God being white and having one eye they interpreted as meaning that God was the sun and was to be worshipped as the all-seeing giver of light and life. This had always been so.

There was war in the east, indeed. There had always been war in the east, where people coming out of the wilderness tried to steal our grain, and we conquered them and taught them how to grow it. General Lord Drowning sent angels back with news of his conquests all the way to the Fifth River.

There was no famine in the west. There had never been famine in God's country. God's children saw to it that crops were properly sown and grown and saved and shared. If the ze failed in the western lands, our carters pulled two-wheeled carts laden with grain on the great stone roads over the mountains from the central lands. If crops failed in the north, the carts went north from the Four Rivers land. From west to east carts came laden with smoked fish, from the Sunrise peninsula they came west with fruit and seaweed. The granaries and storehouses of God were always stocked and open to people in need. They had only to ask the administrators of the stores; what was needed was given. No one went hungry. Famine was a word that belonged to those we had brought into our land, people like the Tegh, the Chasi, the North Hills people. The hungry people, we called them.

The birthday of the world came again, and the most fearful words

of the oracle -- the world came again -- were remembered. In public the priests rejoiced and comforted the common people, saying the God's mercy had spared the world. In our house there was little comfort. We all knew that God Himself was ill. He had hidden himself away more and more throughout the year, and many of the ceremonies took place without the divine presence, or only Herself was there.

She seemed always quiet and untroubled. My lessons were mostly with her now, and with her I always felt that nothing had changed or could change and all would be well.

God danced the Dance that Turns as the sun stood still above the shoulder of the sacred mountain. He danced slowly, missing many steps. He went into the ash

house. We waited, everybody waited, all over the city, all over the country. The sun went down behind Kanaghadwa. All the snow peaks of the mountains from the north to south, Kayewa, burning Korosi, Aghet, Enni, Aziza, Kanaghadwa, burned gold, then fiery red, then purple. The light went up them and went out, leaving them white as ashes. The stars came out above them. Then at last the drums beat and the music sounded down in the Glittering Square, and torches made the pavement sparkle and gleam. The priests came out of the narrow doors of the ash house in order, in procession. They stopped. In the silence the oldest dream priest said in her thin, clear voice, "Nothing was seen over the shoulder of God."

Onto the silence ran a buzzing and whispering of people's voices, like little insects running over sand. That died out.

The priests turned and went back into the ash house in procession, in due order, in silence.

The ranks of angels waiting to carry the words of the oracle to the countryside stood still while their captains spoke in a group. Then the angels moved away in groups by the five streets that start at the Glittering Square and lead to the five great stone roads that go out from the city across the lands. As always before, when the angels entered the streets they began to run, to carry God's word swiftly to the people. But they had no word to carry.

Tazu came to stand behind me on the balcony. He was twelve years old that day. I

was fifteen.

He said, "Ze, may I touch you?"

I looked yes, and he put his hand in mine. That was comforting. Tazu was a serious, silent person. He tired easily, and often his head and eyes hurt so badly he could hardly see, but he did all the ceremonies and sacred acts faithfully, and studied with our teachers of history and geography and archery and dancing and writing, and with

our mother studied the sacred knowledge, learning to be God. Some of our lessons he and I did together, helping each other. He was a kind brother and we were in each other's heart.

As he held my hand he said, "Ze, I think we'll be married soon."

I knew what his thoughts were. God our father had missed many steps of the dance that turns the world. He had seen nothing over his shoulder, looking into the time to come.

But what I thought in that moment was how strange it was that in the same place on the same day one year it was Omimo who said we should be married, and the next year it was Tazu.

"Maybe," I said. I held his hand tight, knowing he was frightened at being God.

So was I. But there was no use being afraid. When the time came, we would be God.

If the time came. Maybe the sun had not stopped and turned back above the peak of Kanaghadwa. Maybe God had not turned the year.

Maybe there would be no more time -- no time coming behind our backs, only what lay before us, only what we could see with mortal eyes. Only our own lives and nothing else.

That was so terrible a thought that my breath stopped and I shut my eyes, squeezing Tazu's thin hand, holding on to him, till I could steady my mind with the thought that there was still no use being afraid.

This year past, Lord Idiot's testicles had ripened at last, and he had begun trying to rape women. After he hurt a young holy girl and attacked others, God had him castrated. Since then he had been quiet again, though he often looked sad and lonely. Seeing Tazu and me holding hands, he seized Arzi's hand and stood beside him as Tazu and I were standing. "God, God!" he said, smiling with pride. But Arzi, who was nine, pulled his hand away and said, "You won't ever be God, you can't be, you're an idiot, you don't know anything!" Old Haghag scolded Arzi wearily and bitterly. Arzi did not cry, but Lord Idiot did, and Haghag had tears in her eyes.

The sun went north as in any year, as if God had danced the steps of the dance rightly. And on the dark day of the year, it turned back southward behind the peak of great Enni, as in any year. On that day, God Himself was dying, and Tazu and I were taken in to see him and be blessed. He lay all gone to bone in a

smell of rot and sweet herbs burning. God my mother lifted his hand and put it on my head, then on Tazu's, while we knelt by the great bed of leather and bronze with our thumbs to our foreheads. She said the words of blessing. God my father said nothing, until he whispered, "Ze, Ze!" He was not calling to me. The name of God Herself is always Ze. He was calling to his sister and wife while he

died.

Two nights later I woke in darkness. The deep drums were beating all through the house. I heard other drums begin to beat in the temples of worship and the squares farther away in the city, and then others yet farther away. In the countryside under the stars they would hear those drums and begin to beat their own drums, up in the hills, in the mountain passes and over the mountains to the western sea, across the fields eastward, across the four great rivers, from town to town clear to the wilderness. That same night, I thought, my brother Omimo in his camp under the North Hills would hear the drums saying God is dead.

A SON AND DAUGHTER OF GOD, marrying, became God. This marriage could not take

place till God's death, but always it took place within a few hours, so that the

world would not be long bereft. I knew this from all we had been taught. It was

ill fate that my mother delayed my marriage to Tazu. If we had been married at

once, Omimo's claim would have been useless; not even his soldiers would have

dared follow him. In her grief she was distraught. And she did not know or could

not imagine the measure of Omimo's ambition, driving him to violence and

sacrilege.

Informed by the angels of our father's illness, he had for days been marching

swiftly westward with a small troop of loyal soldiers. When the drums beat, he heard them not in the far North Hills, but in the fortress on the hill called Ghari that stands north across the valley in sight of the city and the house of God.

The preparations for burning the body of the man who had been God were going forward; the ash priests saw to that. Preparations for our wedding should have been going forward at the same time, but our mother, who should have seen to them, did not come out of her room.

Her sister Lady Clouds and other lords and ladies of the household talked of the wedding hats and garlands, of the music priests who should come to play, of the festivals that should be arranged in the city and the villages. The marriage priest came anxiously to them, but they dared do nothing and he dared do nothing until my mother allowed them to act. Lady Clouds knocked at her door but she did not answer. They were so nervous and uneasy,

waiting for her all day long, that I thought I would go mad staying with them. I went down into the garden court to walk.

I had never been farther outside the walls of our house than the balconies. I had never walked across the Glittering Square into the streets of the city. I had never seen a field or a river. I had never walked on dirt.

God's sons were carried in litters into the streets to the temples for rituals, and in summer after the birthday of the world they were always taken up into the

mountains to Chimlu, where the world began, at the springs of the River of Origin. Every year when he came back from there, Tazu would tell me about Chimlu, how the mountains went up all around the ancient house there, and wild dragons flew from peak to peak. There God's sons hunted dragons and slept under the stars. But the daughter of God must keep the house.

The garden court was in my heart. It was where I could walk under the sky. It had five fountains of peaceful water, and flowering trees in great pots; plants of sacred ze grew against the sunniest wall in containers of copper and silver.

All my life, when I had a time free of ceremonies and lessons, I went there.

When I was little, I pretended the insects there were dragons and hunted them.

Later I played throwbone with Ruaway, or sat and watched the water of the fountains well and fall, well and fall, till the stars came out in the sky above the walls.

This day as always, Ruaway came with me. Since I could not go anywhere alone but must have a companion, I had asked God Herself to make her my chief companion.

I sat down by the center fountain. Ruaway knew I wanted silence and went off to the corner under the fruit trees to wait. She could sleep anywhere at any time.

I sat thinking how strange it would be to have Tazu always as my companion, day and night, instead of Ruaway. But I could not make my thoughts real.

The garden court had a door that opened on the street. Sometimes when the gardeners opened it to let each other in and out, I had looked out of it to see the world outside my house. The door was always locked on both sides, so that

two people had to open it. As I sat by the fountain, I saw a man who I thought was a gardener cross the court and unbolt the door. Several men came in. One was my brother Omimo.

I think that door had been only his way to come secretly into the house. I think he had planned to kill Tazu and Arzi so that I would

have to marry him. That he found me there in the garden as if waiting for him was the chance of that time, the fate that was on us.

"Ze!" he said as he came past the fountain where I sat. His voice was like my father's voice calling to my mother.

"Lord Drowning," I said, standing up. I was so bewildered that I said, "You're not here!" I saw that he had been wounded. His right eye was closed with a scar.

He stood still, staring at me from his one eye, and said nothing, getting over his own surprise. Then he laughed.

"No, sister," he said, and turning to his men gave them orders. There were five of them, I think, soldiers, with hardened skin all over their bodies. They wore angel's shoes on their feet, and belts around their waists and necks to support the sheaths for their penis and sword and daggers. Omimo looked like them, but with gold sheaths and the silver hat of a general. I did not understand what he said to the men. They came close to me, and Omimo came closer, so that I said, "Don't touch me," to warn them of their danger, for common men who touched me

would be burned to death by the priests of the law, and even Omimo if he touched me without my permission would have to do penance and fast for a year. But he laughed again, and as I drew away, he took hold of my arm suddenly, putting his hand over my mouth. I bit down as hard as I could on his hand. He pulled it away and then slapped it again so hard on my mouth and nose that my head fell back and I could not breathe. I struggled and fought, but my eyes kept seeing blackness and flashes. I felt hard hands holding me, twisting my arms, pulling me up in the air, carrying me, and the hand on my mouth and nose tightened its grip till I could not breathe at all.

Ruaway had been drowsing under the trees, lying on the pavement among the big pots. They did not see her, but she saw them. She knew at once if they saw her they would kill her. She lay still. As soon as they had carried me out the gate into the street, she ran into the house to my mother's room and threw open the door. This was sacrilege, but, not knowing who in the household might be in sympathy with Omimo, she could trust only my mother.

"Lord Drowning has carried Ze off," she said. She told me later that my mother sat there silent and desolate in the dark room for so long that Ruaway thought she had not heard. She was about to speak again, when my mother stood up. Grief fell away from her. She said, "We cannot trust the army," her mind leaping at once to see what must be done, for she was one who had been God. "Bring Tazu here," she said to Ruaway.

Ruaway found Tazu among the holy people, called him to her with her eyes, and asked him to go to his mother at once. Then she

went out of the house by the

garden door that still stood unlocked and unwatched. She asked people in the Glittering Square if they had seen some soldiers with a drunken girl. Those who had seen us told her to take the northeast street. And so little time had passed that when she came out the northern gate of the city she saw Omimo and his men climbing the hill road toward Ghari, carrying me up to the old fort. She ran back to tell my mother this.

Consulting with Tazu and Lady Clouds and those people she most trusted, my mother sent for several old generals of the peace, whose soldiers served to keep order in the countryside, not in war on the frontiers. She asked for their obedience, which they promised her, for though she was not God she had been God, and was daughter and mother of God. And there was no one else to obey.

She talked next with the dream priests, deciding with them what messages the angels should carry to the people. There was no doubt that Omimo had carried me off to try to make himself God by marrying me. If my mother announced first, in the voices of the angels, that his act was not a marriage performed by the marriage priest, but was rape, then it might be the people would not believe he and I were God.

So the news went out on swift feet, all over the city and the countryside.

Omimo's army, now following him west as fast as they could march, were loyal to him. Some other soldiers joined him along the way. Most of the peacekeeping soldiers of the center land supported my mother. She named Tazu their general.

He and she put up a brave and resolute front, but they had little true hope, for there was no God, nor could there be so long as Omimo had me in his power to rape or kill.

All this I learned later. What I saw and knew was this: I was in a low room without windows in the old fortress. The door was locked from outside. Nobody was with me and no guards were at the door, since nobody was in the fort but Omimo's soldiers. I waited there not knowing if it was day or night. I thought time had stopped, as I had feared it would. There was no light in the room, an old store-room under the pavement of the fortress. Creatures moved on the dirt floor. I walked on dirt then. I sat on dirt and lay on it.

The bolt of the door was shot. Torches flaring in the doorway dazzled me. Men came in and stuck a torch in the sconce on the wall. Omimo came through them to me. His penis stood upright and he came to me to rape me. I spat in his half-blind face and said, "If you touch me your penis will burn like that torch!" He showed his teeth as if he was laughing. He pushed me down and pushed my legs apart,

but he was shaking, frightened of my sacred being. He tried to push his penis into me with his hands but it had gone soft. He could not rape me. I said, "You can't, look, you can't rape me!"

His soldiers watched and heard all this. In his humiliation, Omimo pulled his sword from its gold sheath to kill me, but the soldiers held his hands, preventing him, saying, "Lord, Lord, don't kill her, she must be God with you!" Omimo shouted and fought them as I had fought him, and so they all went out, shouting and struggling with him. One of them seized the torch, and the door

clashed behind them. After a little while I felt my way to the door and tried it, thinking they might have forgotten to bolt it, but it was bolted. I crawled back to the corner where I had been and lay on the dirt in the dark.

Truly we were all on the dirt in the dark. There was no God. God was the son and daughter of God joined in marriage by the marriage priest. There was no other.

There was no other way to go. Omimo did not know what way to go, what to do. He could not marry me without the marriage priest's words. He thought by raping me he would be my husband, and maybe it would have been so: but he could not rape me. I made him impotent.

The only thing he saw to do was attack the city, take the house of God and its priests captive, and force the marriage priest to say the words that made God.

He could not do this with the small force he had with him, so he waited for his army to come from the east.

Tazu and the generals and my mother gathered soldiers into the city from the center land. They did not try to attack Ghari. It was a strong fort, easy to defend, hard to attack, and they feared that if they besieged it, they would be caught between it and Omimo's great army coming from the east.

So the soldiers that had come with him, about two hundred of them, garrisoned the fort. As the days passed, Omimo provided women for them. It was the policy of God to give village women extra grain or tools or crop-rows for going to fuck with the soldiers at army camps and stations. There were always women glad to oblige the soldiers and take the reward, and if they got pregnant of course they received more reward and support. Seeking to ease and placate his men, Omimo sent officers down to offer gifts to girls in the villages near Ghari. A group of girls agreed to come; for the common people understood very little of the situation, not believing that anyone could revolt against God. With these village women came Ruaway.

The women and girls ran about the fort, teasing and playing with the soldiers off duty. Ruaway found where I was by fate and courage,

coming down into the dark passages under the pavement and trying the doors of the storerooms. I heard the bolt move in the lock. She said my name. I made some sound. "Come!" she said. I crawled to the door. She took my arm and helped me stand and walk. She shot the bolt shut again, and we felt our way down the black passage till we saw light flicker on stone steps. We came out into a torchlit courtyard full of girls and soldiers. Ruaway at once began to run through them, giggling and chattering nonsense, holding tight to my arm so that I ran with her. A couple of soldiers grabbed at us, but Ruaway dodged them, saying, "No, no, Tuki's for the Captain!" We ran on, and came to the side gate, and Ruaway said to the guards, "Oh, let us out, Captain, Captain, I have to take her back to her mother, she's vomiting sick with fever!" I was staggering and covered with dirt and filth from my prison. The guards laughed at me and said foul words about my foulness and opened the gate a crack to let us out. And we ran on down the hill in the starlight.

To escape from a prison so easily, to run through locked doors, people have said, I must have been God indeed. But there was no God then, as there is none

now. Long before God, and long after also, is the way things are, which we call chance, or luck, or fortune, or fate; but those are only names.

And there is courage. Ruaway freed me because I was in her heart.

As soon as we were out of sight of the guards at the gate we left the road, on which there were sentries, and cut across country to the city. It stood mightily on the great slope before us, its stone walls starlit. I had never seen it except from the windows and balconies of the house at the center of it.

I had never walked far, and though I was strong from the exercises I did as part of our lessons, my soles were as tender as my palms. Soon I was grunting and tears kept starting in my eyes from the shocks of pain from rocks and gravel underfoot. I found it harder and harder to breathe. I could not run. But Ruaway kept hold of my hand, and we went on.

We came to the north gate, locked and barred and heavily guarded by soldiers of the peace. Then Ruaway cried out, "Let God's daughter enter the city of God!"

I put back my hair and held myself up straight, though my lungs were full of knives, and said to the captain of the gate, "Lord Captain, take us to my mother Lady Ze in the house in the center of the world."

He was old General Rire's son, a man I knew, and he knew me. He stared at me once, then quickly thumbed his forehead, and roared out orders, and the gates

opened. So we went in and walked the northeast street to my house, escorted by soldiers, and by more and more people shouting in joy. The drums began to beat, the high, fast beat of the festivals.

That night my mother held me in her arms, as she had not done since I was a suckling baby.

That night Tazu and I stood under the garland before the marriage priest and drank from the sacred cups and were married into God.

That night also Omimo, finding I was gone, ordered a death priest of the army to marry him to one of the village girls who came to fuck with the soldiers. Since nobody outside my house, except a few of his men, had ever seen me up close, any girl could pose as me. Most of his soldiers believed the girl was me. He proclaimed that he had married the daughter of the Dead God and that she and he were now God. As we sent out angels to tell of our marriage, so he sent runners to say that the marriage in the house of God was false, since his sister Ze had run away with him and married him at Ghari, and she and he were now the one true God. And he showed himself to the people wearing a gold hat, with white paint on his face, and his blinded eye, while the army priests cried out, "Behold! The oracle is fulfilled! God is white and has one eye!"

Some believed his priests and messengers. More believed ours. But all were distressed or frightened or made angry by hearing messengers proclaim two Gods at one time, so that instead of knowing the truth, they had to choose to believe.

Omimo's great army was now only four or five days' march away.

Angels came to us saying that a young general, Mesiwa, was bringing a thousand soldiers of the peace up from the rich coasts south of the city. He told the angels only that he came to fight for "the one true God." We feared that meant Omimo. For we added no words to our name, since the word itself means the only truth, or else it means nothing.

We were wise in our choice of generals, and decisive in acting on their advice. Rather than wait for the city to be besieged, we resolved to send a force to attack the eastern army before it reached Ghari, meeting it in the foothills above the River of Origin. We would have to fall back as their full strength came up, but we could strip the country as we did so, and bring the country people into the city. Meanwhile we sent carts to and from all the storehouses on the southern and western roads to fill the city's granaries. If the war did not end quickly, said the old generals, it would be won by those who could keep eating.

"Lord Drowning's army can feed themselves from the storehouses along the east and north roads," said my mother, who attended all our

councils.

"Destroy the roads," Tazu said.

I heard my mother's breath catch, and remembered the oracle: The roads will be broken.

"That would take as long to do as it took to make them," said the oldest general, but the next oldest general said, "Break down the stone bridge at Almoghay." And so we ordered. Retreating from its delaying battle, our army tore down the great bridge that had stood a thousand years. Omimo's army had to go round nearly a hundred miles farther, through forests, to the ford at Domi, while our army and our carters brought the contents of the storehouses in to the city. Many country people followed them, seeking the protection of God, and so the city grew very full. Every grain of ze came with a mouth to eat it.

All this time Mesiwa, who might have come against the eastern army at Domi, waited in the passes with his thousand men. When we commanded him to come help punish sacrilege and restore peace, he sent our angel back with meaningless messages. It seemed certain that he was in league with Omimo. "Mesiwa the finger, Omimo the thumb," said the oldest general, pretending to crack a louse.

"God is not mocked," Tazu said to him, deadly fierce. The old general bowed his forehead down on his thumbs, abashed. But I was able to smile.

Tazu had hoped the country people would rise up in anger at the sacrilege and strike the Painted God down. But they were not soldiers and had never fought.

They had always lived under the protection of the soldiers of peace and under our care. As if our doings now were like the whirlwind or the earthquake, they were paralyzed by them and could only watch and wait till they were over, hoping to survive. Only the people of our household, whose livelihood depended directly upon us and whose skills and knowledge were at our service, and the people of the city in whose heart we were, and the soldiers of the peace, would fight for us.

The country people had believed in us. Where no belief is, no God is. Where doubt is, foot falters and hand will not take hold.

The wars at the borders, the wars of conquest, had made our land too large. The people in the towns and villages knew no more who I was than I knew who they were. In the days of the origin, Babam Kerul and Bamam Ze came down from the mountain and walked the fields of the center lands beside the common people. The common people who laid the first stones of the great roads and the huge base stones of the old city wall had known the face of their God, seeing it daily.

After I spoke of this to our councils, Tazu and I went out into the

streets, sometimes carried in litters, sometimes walking. We were surrounded by the priests and guards who honored our divinity, but we went among the people, meeting their eyes. They fell on their knees and put their foreheads to their thumbs, and many wept when they saw us. They called out from street to street, and little children cried out, "There's God!"

"You walk in their hearts," my mother said.

But Omimo's army had come to the River of Origin, and one day's march brought the vanguard to Ghari.

That evening we stood on the north balcony looking toward Ghari hill, which was swarming with men, as when a nest of insects swarms. To the west the light was dark red on the mountains in their winter snow. From Korosi a vast plume of smoke trailed, blood color.

"Look," Tazu said, pointing northwest. A light flared in the sky, like the sheet lightning of summer. "A falling star," he said, and I said, "An eruption."

In the dark of the night, angels came to us. "A great house burned and fell from the sky," one said, and the other said, "It burned hut it stands, on the bank of the river."

"The words of God spoken on the birthday of the world," I said.

The angels knelt down hiding their faces.

WHAT I SAW THEN is not what I see now looking far off to the distant past; what I knew then is both less and more than I know now. I try to say what I saw and knew then.

That morning I saw coming down the great stone road to the northern gate a group of beings, two-legged and erect like people or lizards. They were the height of giant desert lizards, with monstrous limbs and feet, but without tails. They were white all over and hairless. Their heads had no mouth or nose and one huge single staring shining lidless eye.

They stopped outside the gate.

Not a man was to be seen on Ghari Hill. They were all in the fortress or hidden in the woods behind the hill.

We were standing up on the top of the northern gate, where a wall runs chest-high to protect the guards.

There was a little sound of frightened weeping on the roofs and balconies of the city, and people called out to us, "God! God, save us!"

Tazu and I had talked all night. We listened to what our mother and other wise people said, and then we sent them away to reach out our minds together, to look over our shoulder into the time that was coming. We saw the death and the birth of the world, that night. We saw all things changed.

The oracle had said that God was white and had one eye. This was what we saw now. The oracle had said that the world died. With

it died our brief time of being God. This was what we had to do now: to kill the world. The world must die so that God may live. The house falls that it may stand. Those who have been God must make God welcome.

Tazu spoke welcome to God, while I ran down the spiral stairs inside the wall of the gate and unbolted the great bolts -- the guards had to help me -- and swung the door open. "Enter in!" I said to God, and put my forehead to my thumbs, kneeling.

They came in, hesitant, moving slowly, ponderously. Each one turned its huge eye from side to side, unblinking. Around the eye was a ring of silver that flashed in the sun. I saw myself in one of those eyes, a pupil in the eye of God.

Their snow-white skin was coarse and wrinkled, with bright tattoos on it. I was dismayed that God could be so ugly.

The guards had shrunk back against the walls. Tazu had come down to stand with me. One of them raised a box toward us. A noise came out of the box, as if some animal was shut in it.

Tazu spoke to them again, telling them that the oracle had foretold their coming, and that we who had been God welcomed God.

They stood there, and the box made more noises. I thought it sounded like Ruaway before she learned to talk right. Was the language of God no longer ours? Or was God an animal, as Ruaway's people believed? I thought they seemed more like the monstrous lizards of the desert that lived in the zoo of our house than they seemed like us.

One raised its thick arm and pointed at our house, down at the end of the street, taller than other houses, its copper gutters and goldleaf carvings shining in the bright winter sunlight.

"Come, Lord," I said, "come to your house." We led them to it and brought them inside.

When we came into the low, long, windowless audience room, one of them took off its head. Inside it was a head like ours, with two eyes, nose, mouth, ears. The others did the same.

Then, seeing their head was a mask, I saw that their white skin was like a shoe that they wore not just on the foot but all over their body. Inside this shoe they were like us, though the skin of their faces was the color of clay pots and looked very thin, and their hair was shiny and lay flat.

"Bring food and drink," I said to the children of God cowering outside the door, and they ran to bring trays of ze-cakes and dried fruit and winter beer. God came to the tables where the food was set. Some of them pretended to eat. One, watching what I did, touched the ze-cake to its forehead first, and then bit into it and chewed and swallowed. It spoke to the others, gre-gra, gre-gra.

This one was also the first to take off its body-shoe. Inside it other wrappings and coverings hid and protected most of its body, but this was understandable, because even the body skin was pale and terribly thin, soft as a baby's eyelid.

In the audience room, on the east wall over the double seat of God, hung the gold mask which God Himself wore to turn the sun back on its way. The one who

had eaten the cake pointed at the mask. Then it looked at me -- its own eyes were oval, large, and beautiful -- and pointed up to where the sun was in the sky. I nodded my body. It pointed its finger here and there all about the mask, and then all about the ceiling.

"There must be more masks made, because God is now more than two," Tazu said.

I had thought the gesture might signify the stars, but I saw that Tazu's interpretation made more sense.

"We will have masks made," I told God, and then ordered the hat priest to go fetch the gold hats which God wore during ceremonies and festivals. There were many of these hats, some jewelled and ornate, others plain, all very ancient.

The hat priest brought them in due order two by two until they were all set out on the great table of polished wood and bronze where the ceremonies of First Ze and Harvest were celebrated.

Tazu took off the gold hat he wore, and I took off mine. Tazu put his hat on the head of the one who had eaten the cake, and I chose a short one and reached up and put my hat on its head. Then, choosing ordinary-day hats, not those of the sacred occasions, we put a hat on each of the heads of God, while they stood and waited for us to do so.

Then we knelt bareheaded and put our foreheads against our thumbs.

God stood there. I was sure they did not know what to do. "God is grown, but

new, like a baby," I said to Tazu. I was sure they did not understand what we said.

All at once the one I had put my hat on came to me and put its hands on my elbows to raise me up from kneeling. I pulled back at first, not being used to being touched; then I remembered I was no longer very sacred, and let God touch me. It talked and gestured. It gazed into my eyes. It took off the gold hat and tried to put it back on my head. At that I did shrink away, saying, "No, no!" It seemed blasphemy, to say No to God, but I knew better.

God talked among themselves then for a while, and Tazu and our mother and I were able to talk among ourselves. What we understood was this: the oracle had not been wrong, of course, but it had been subtle. God was not truly one-eyed nor blind, but did not know how to

see. It was not God's skin that was white, but their mind that was blank and ignorant. They did not know how to talk, how to act, what to do. They did not know their people.

Yet how could Tazu and I, or our mother and our old teachers, teach them? The world had died and a new world was coming to be. Everything in it might be new. Everything might be different. So it was not God, but we, who did not know how to see, what to do, how to speak.

I felt this so strongly that I knelt again and prayed to God, "Teach us!"

They looked at me and talked to each other, brr-grr, gre-gra.

I sent our mother and the others to talk with our generals, for angels had come with reports about Omimo's army. Tazu was very tired from lack of sleep. We two sat down on the floor together and talked quietly. He was concerned about God's seat. "How can they all sit on it at once?" he said.

"They'll have more seats added," I said. "Or now two will sit on it, and then another two. They're all God, the way you and I were, so it doesn't matter."

"But none of them is a woman," Tazu said.

I looked at God more carefully and saw that he was right. This disturbed me slowly, but very deeply. How could God be only half human?

In my world, a marriage made God. In this world coming to be, what made God?

I thought of Omimo. White clay on his face and a false marriage had made him a false God, but many people believed he was truly God. Would the power of their belief make him God, while we gave our power to this new, ignorant God?

If Omimo found out how helpless they appeared to be, not knowing how to speak, not even knowing how to eat, he would fear their divinity even less than he had feared ours. He would attack. And would our soldiers fight for this God.

I saw clearly that they would not. I saw from the back of my head, with the eyes that see what is coming. I saw the misery that was coming to my people. I saw the world dead, but I did not see it being born. What world could be born of a God who was male? Men do not give birth.

Everything was wrong. It came very strongly into my mind that we should have our soldiers kill God now, while they were still new in the world and weak.

And then? If we killed God there would be no God. We could pretend to be God again, the way Omimo pretended. But godhead is not pretense. Nor is it put on and off like a golden hat.

The world had died. That was fated and foretold. The fate of these strange men was to be God, and they would have to live their fate as we lived ours, finding out what it was to be as it came to be, unless they could see over their shoulders, which is one of the gifts of God.

I stood up again, taking Tazu's hand so that he stood beside me. "The city is yours," I said to them, "and the people are yours. The world is yours, and the war is yours. All praise and glory to you, our God!" And we knelt once more and bowed our foreheads deeply to our thumbs, and left them.

"Where are we going?" Tazu said. He was twelve years old and no longer God. There were tears in his eyes.

"To find Mother and Ruaway," I said, "and Arzi and Lord Idiot and Haghag, and any of our people who want to come with us." I had begun to say "our children,"

but we were no longer their mother and father.

"Come where?" Tazu said.

"To Chimlu."

"Up in the mountains? Run and hide? We should stay and fight Omimo."

"What for?" I said.

That was sixty years ago.

I have written this to tell how it was to live in the house of God before the world ended and began again. To tell it I have tried to write with the mind I had then. But neither then nor now do I fully understand the oracle which my father and all the priests saw and spoke. All of it came to pass. Yet we have no God, and no oracles to guide us.

None of the strange men lived a long life, but they all lived longer than Omimo.

We were on the long road up into the mountains when an angel caught up with us to tell us that Mesiwa had joined Omimo, and the two generals had brought their great army against the house of the strangers, which stood like a tower in the fields near Soze River, with a waste of burned earth around it. The strangers warned Omimo and his army clearly to withdraw, sending lightning out of the house over their heads that set distant trees afire. Omimo would not heed. He

could prove he was God only by killing God. He commanded his army to rush at the tall house. He and Mesiwa and a hundred men around him were destroyed by a single bolt of lightning. They were burned to ash. His army fled in terror.

"They are God! They are God indeed!" Tazu said when he heard the angel tell us that. He spoke joyfully, for he was as unhappy in his doubt as I was. And for a while we could all believe in them, since they could wield the lightning. Many people called them God as long

as they lived.

My belief is that they were not God in any sense of the word I understand, but were otherworldly, supernatural beings, who had great powers, but were weak and ignorant of our world, and soon sickened of it and died.

There were fourteen of them in all. Some of them lived more than ten years.

These learned to speak as we do. One of them came up into the mountains to Chimlu, along with some of the pilgrims who still wanted to worship Tazu and me as God. Tazu and I and this man talked for many days, learning from each other.

He told us that their house moved in the air, flying like a dragon-lizard, but its wings were broken. He told us that in the land they came from the sunlight is very weak, and it was our strong sunlight that made them sick. Though they covered their bodies with weavings, still their thin skins let the sunlight in, and they would all die soon. He told us they were sorry they had come. I said,

"You had to come. God saw you coming. What use is it to be sorry?"

He agreed with me that they were not God. He said that God lived in the sky.

That seemed to us a useless place for God to live. Tazu said they had indeed been God when they came, since they fulfilled the oracle and changed the world; but now, like us, they were common people.

Ruaway took a liking to this stranger, maybe because she had been a stranger, and when he was at Chimlu they slept together. She said he was like any man under his weavings and coverings. He told her he could not impregnate her, as his seed would not ripen in our earth. Indeed the strangers left no children.

This stranger told us his name, Bin-yi-zin. He came back up to Chimlu several times, and was the last of them to die. He left with Ruaway the dark crystals he wore before his eyes, which make things look larger and clearer for her, though to my eyes they make things dim. To me he gave his own record of his life, in a beautiful writing made of lines of little pictures, which I keep in the box with this writing I make.

When Tazu's testicles ripened we had to decide what to do, for brothers and sisters among the common people do not marry. We asked the priests and they advised us that our marriage being divine could not be unmade, and that though no longer God we were husband and wife. Since we were in each other's heart, this pleased us, and often we slept together. Twice I conceived, but the conceptions aborted, one very early and one in the fourth month, and I did not conceive again. This was a grief to us, and yet fortunate, for had we

had children, the people might have tried to make them be God.

It takes a long time to learn to live without God, and some people never do.

They would rather have a false God than none at all. All through the years, tough seldom now, people would climb up to Chimlu to beg Tazu and me to come back down to the city and be God. And when it became clear that the strangers would not rule the country as God, either under the old rules or with new ones, men began to imitate Omimo, marrying ladies of our lineage and claiming to be a new God. They all found followers and they all made wars, fighting each other. None of them had Omimo's terrible courage, or the loyalty of a great army to a successful general. They have all come to wretched ends at the hands of angry, disappointed, wretched people.

For my people and my land have fared no better than I feared and saw over my shoulder on the night the world ended. The great stone roads are not maintained.

In places they are already broken. Almoghay bridge was never rebuilt. The granaries and storehouses are empty and falling down. The old and sick must beg from neighbors, and a pregnant girl has only her mother to turn to, and an orphan has no one. There is famine in the west and south. We are the hungry people, now. The angels no longer weave the net of government, and one part of the land knows nothing of the others. They say barbarians have brought back the wilderness across the Fourth River, and ground dragons spawn in the fields of grain. Little generals and painted gods raise armies to waste lives and goods and spoil the sacred earth.

The evil time will not last forever. No time does. I died as God a long time ago. I have lived as a common woman a long time. Each year I see the sun turn back from the south behind great Kanaghadwa. Though God does not dance on the

glittering pavement, yet I see the birthday of the world over the shoulder of my death.

THE VISIONARY by URSULA K. LE GUIN

fromOmni October 1984

My mother and aunt said that when I was learning to talk, I talked to people they could not see or hear, sometimes speaking in our language and sometimes saying words or names they did not know. I can't remember doing that, but I remember that I could not understand why people said that a room was empty or that there was nobody in the gardens, because there were always people of different kinds, everywhere. Mosty they stayed quietly or were going about their doings, or passing through. I had already learned that nobody talked to them and that they did not often pay heed or answer when I tried to talk to them, but it had not occurred to me that other people

did not see them.

I had a big argument with my cousin once when she said there was nobody in the wash house, and I had seen a whole group of people there, passing things from hand to hand and laughing silently, as if they were playing some gambling game. My cousin, who was older than I, said I was lying, and I began to scream and tried to knock her down. I can feel that same anger now. I was telling what I had seen and could not believe she had not seen the people in the wash house; I thought she was lying in order to call me a liar. That anger and shame stayed a long time and made me unwilling to look at the people that other people didn't see or wouldn't talk about. When I saw them, I looked away until they were gone. I had thought they were all my kinfolk, people of my household, and seeing them had been companionship and pleasure to me; but now I felt I could not trust them, since they had got me into trouble. Of course I had it all backward, but there was nobody to help me get it straight. My family was not much given to thinking about things, and except for going to school, I went to our heyimas only in the Summer before the games.

When I turned away from all those people that I had used to see, they went on and did not come back. Only a few were left, and I was lonely.

I liked to be with my father, Olive of the Yellow Adobe, a man who talked little and was cautious and gentle in mind and hand. He repaired and reinstalled solar panels and collectors and batteries and lines and fixtures in houses and outbuildings; all his work was with the Miller's Art. He did not mind if I eame along if I was quiet, and so I went with him to be away from our noisy, busy household. When he saw that I liked his art, he began to teach it to me. My mothers were not enthusiastic about that. My Serpentine grandmother did not like having a Miller for son-in-law, and my mother wanted me to learn medicine. "If she has the third eye, she ought to put it to good use," they said, and they sent me to the Doctors Lodge on White Sulfur Creek to learn. Although I learned a good deal there and liked the teachers, I did not like the work and was impatient with the illnesses and accidents of mortality, preferring the dangerous, dancing energies my father worked with. I could often see the electrical current, and there were excitements of feeling, tones of a kind of sweet music barely to be heard, and tones also of voices speaking and singing, distant and hard to understand, that came when I worked with the batteries and wires. I did not speak of this to my father. If he felt and heard any of these things, he preferred to leave them unspoken, outside the house of words.

My childhood was like everybody's, except that with going to the Doctors Lodge and working with my father and liking to be alone,

perhaps I played less with other children than many children do, after I was seven or eight years old. Also, though I went all over Telina with my father and knew all the ways and houses, we never went out of town. My family had no summer house and never even visited the hills. "Why leave Telina?" my grandmother would say. "Everything is here!" And in summer the town was pleasant, even when it was hot; so many people were away that there was never a crowd at the wash house, and houses standing empty were entirely different from houses full of people, and the ways and gardens and common places were lonesome and lazy and quiet. It was always in summer, often in the great heat of the afternoon, that I would see the people passing through Telina-na, coming upriver. They are hard to describe, and I have no idea who they were. They were rather short and walked quietly, alone, or three or four - one after the other; their limbs were smooth and their faces round, often with some lines or marks drawn on the lips or chin; their eyes were narrow, and sometimes looked swollen and sore as if from smoke or weeping. They would go quietly through the town, not looking at it and never speaking, going upriver. When I saw them I would always say the four heyas. The way they went, silently, gripped at my heart. They were far from me, walking in sorrow.

When I was nearly twelve years old, my cousin came of age, and the family gave a very big passage party far her, giving away all kinds of things I didn't even know we had. The following year I came of age, and we had another big party, though without such lavishness, as we didn't have so much left to give. I had entered the Blood Lodge just before the Moon, and the party for me was during the Summer Dance. At the end of the party, there were horse games and races, for the Summer people had come down from Chukulmas.

I had never been on horseback. The boys and girls who rode in the games and races for Telina brought a steady mare for me to ride and boosted me up to her back and put the rein in my hand, and off we went. I felt like the wild swan. That was pure joy. And I could share it with the other young people; we were all joined by the good feeling of the party and the excitement of the games and races and the beauty and passion of the horses, who thought it was all their festival. The mare taught me how to ride that day, and I was on horseback all night dreaming, and the next day, rode again; and on the third day I rode in a race, on a roan colt from a household in Chukulmas. The colt ran second in the big race when I rode him and ran first in the match race when the boy who had raised him rode him. In all that glory of festival and riding and racing and friendship, I left my childhood most joyously, but also I went out of my House, and got lost from too much being given me at once. I gave my heart to the red colt I rode and to

the boy who rode him, a brother of the Serpentine of Chukulmas.

It was a long time ago and not his fault or doing; he did not know it. The word I write is my word; to myself let it be brought back.

So the Summer games were over in our town and the horse riders went off downriver to Madidinou and Ounmalin; and there I was, a thirteen-year-old woman and afoot.

I wore the undyed clothing I had been making all the year before, and I went often to the Blood Lodge, learning the songs and mysteries. Young people who had been friendly to me at the games remained friends, and when they found I longed to ride, they shared the horses of their households with me. I learned to play vetulou and helped with caring for the horses, who were stabled and pastured then northwest of Moon Creek in Halfhoof Pasture and on Butt Hill. I said at the Doctors Lodge that I wanted to learn horse doctoring, and so they sent me to learn that art by working with an old man, Striffen, who was a great doctor of horses and cattle, I would listen to him. He used different kinds of noises, words like the matrix words of songs, and different kinds of silences and breathing; and so did the animals. But I never could understand what they were saying.

Once when I came to the Obsidian heyimas for a Blood Lodge singing, a woman, I thought her old then, named Milk, met me in the passage. She looked at me with eyes as sharp and blind as a snake's eyes and said, "What are you here for?"

I answered her, "For the singing," and hurried by, but I knew that was not what she had asked.

In the summer I went with the dancers and riders of Telina to Chukulmas. There I met that boy, that young man. We talked about the roan horse and about the little moonhorse I was riding in the vetulou games. When he stroked the roan horse's flank, I did so too, and the side of my hand touched the side of his hand once.

Then there was another year until the Summer games returned. That was how it was to me: There was nothing I cared for or was mindful of but the Summer and the games.

The old horse doctor died on the first night of the Grass. I had gone to the Lodge Rejoining and learned the songs; I sang them for him. After he was burned I gave up learning his art. I could not talk with the animals or with any other people. I saw nothing clearly and listened to no one, I went back to working with my father, and I rode in the games in Summer. My cousin had a group of friends, girls who talked and played soulbone and dice, gambling for candy and almonds, sometimes for rings and earrings, and I hung around with them every evening, There were no real people in the world I saw at that time. All rooms were empty. Nobody was in the common places and gardens of Telina. Nobody walked upriver grieving.

When the sun turned south, the dancers and riders came again from Chukulmas to Telina, and I rode in the games and races, spending all day and night at the fields. People said, "That girl is in love with the roan stallion from Chukulmas," and teased me about it but not shamefully; everybody knows how adolescents fall in love with horses, and songs have been made about that love. But the horse knew what was wrong: He would no longer let me handle him.

In a few days the riders went on to Madidinou, and I stayed behind.

Things are very obstinate and stubborn, but also there is a sweet willingness in them: They offer what they meet, Electricity is like horses: crazy and willful and also willing and reliable. If you are careless and running counter, a horse or a live wire is a contrary and perilous thing. I burnt and shocked myself several times that year, and once I started a fire in the walls of a house by making a bad connection and not grounding the wires. They smelled the smoke and put out the fire before it did much harm, but my father,

who had brought me into his Art as a novice, was so alarmed and angry that he forbade me to work with him until the next rainy season.

At the Wine that year I was fifteen years old. I got drunk for the first time. I went around town shouting and talking to people nobody else saw. So I was told next day, but I could not remember anything of it. I thought if I got drunk again, but a little less drunk, I might see the kind of people I used to see, when the ways were full of them and they kept my soul company. So I stole wine from our house neighbors, who had most of a barrel left in bottle after the dance, and I went down alone by the Na in the willow flats to drink it.

I drank the first bottle and made some songs, then I spilled most of the second bottle and went home and felt sick for a couple of days. I stole wine again, and this time I drank two bottles quickly. I made no songs. I felt dizzy and sick and fell asleep. Next morning I woke up there in the willow flats on the cold stones by the river, very weak and cold. My family was worried about me after that. It had been a hot night; so I could say I had stayed out for the cool and had fallen asleep, but my mother knew I was lying about something. She thought it must be that I had come inland with some boy but for some reason would not admit it. It shamed and worried her to think that I was wearing undyed clothing when I should no longer do so. It enraged me that she should so distrust me; yet I would say nothing to her in denial or explanation. My father knew that I was sick at heart, but it was soon after that that I set the fire, and his worry turned to anger. As for my cousin, she was in love with a Blue Clay boy and interested in nothing else; the girls with whom I gambled had taken to smoking a

lot of hemp, which I never liked; and though the friends with whom I rode and looked after the horses were still kind, I did not want to be with humans much or even with horses. I did not want the world to be as it was. I had begun making up the world.

I made the world this way: That young man of my House in Chukulmas felt as I felt; and I would go to Chukulmas after the Grass this year. He and I would go up into the hills together and become forest-living people. We would take the roan stallion and go to Looks Up Valley, or farther; we would go to the grass dune country west of the Long Sound, where, he had once told me, the herds of wild horses run. He said that people went from Chukulmas sometimes to catch a wild horse there, but it was country where no human people lived. We would live there together alone, taming and riding the wild horses. Telling myself this world, in the daytime I made us live as brother and sister, but in the nights, lying alone, I made us make love together. The Grass came and passed; I put off going to Chukulmas, telling myself that it would be better to go after the Sun was danced. I had never danced the Sun as an adult, and I wanted to do that; after that, I told myself, I would go to Chukulmas. All along I knew that if I went or if I did not go it did not matter, and all I wanted to do was to die.

It is hard to say to yourself that what you want to do is die. You keep hiding it behind other things, which you pretend to want. I was impatient for the Twenty-One Days to begin, as if my life would start over with them. On the eve of the first day, I went to live at the heyimas.

As soon as I set foot on the ladder, my heart went cold and tight. There was a long-singing that night. My lips got numb, and my voice would not come out of my throat. I wanted to get out and run away, all night, but I did not know where to go.

Next morning three groups formed: One would go over the northwest range into wild country in silence; one would use hemp and mushrooms for trance; and one would drum and long-sing.

I could not choose which group to join, and this distressed me beyond anything. I began shaking, and went to the ladder but could not lift my foot to climb it.

The old doctor named Gall, who had taught me sometimes at the Doctors Lodge, came down the ladder. She was coming to sing, but the habit of her art distracted her, and she observed me. She turned back and said, "Are you not well?"

"I think I am ill."

"Why is that?"

"I want to dance and can't choose the dancing."

"The long-singing?"

"My voice is gone."

"The trances?"

"I'm afraid of them,"

"The journey?"

"I can't leave this house!" I said loudly and began to shake again.

Gall put her head back with her chin sunk in her neck and looked at me from the tops of her eyes.

She was a short, dark, wrinkled woman. She said, "You're already stretched. Do you want to break?"

"Maybe it would be better."

"Maybe it would be better to relax?"

"No it would be worse."

"There's a choice made. Come now."

Gall took my hand and brought me to the doorway of the inmost room of the heyimas, where the people of the Inner Sun were.

I said, "I can't go in there. I'm not old enough to begin the learning."

Gall said, "Your soul is old." She said the same to Black Oak, who came from the gyre to the doorway: "This is an old soul and a young one, stretching each other too hard."

Black Oak, who was then Speaker of the Serpentine, spoke with Gall, but I was not able to listen to what they said. As soon as we had come into the doorway of the inner room, my hair lifted up on my head, and my ears sang. I saw round, bright lights caming and going inside the room, where there was no light but the dim shaft from the topmost skylight. The light began to gyre. Black Oak turned to me and spoke, but at that time, as he spoke, the vision began.

I did not see the man Black Oak, but the Serpentine. It was a rock person, not man nor woman, not human, but in shape like a heavy human being, with the blue, blue-green, and black colors and the surfaces of serpentine rock in its skin. It had no hair, and its eyes were lidless and without transparency, seeing very slowly. Serpentine looked at me very slowly with those rock eyes.

I crouched down in terror. I could not weep or speak or stand or move. I was like a bag full of fear. All I could do was crouch there. I could not breathe at all until a stone, maybe Serpentine's hand, struck my head a hard blow on the right side, above the ear. It knocked me off balance and hurt very much, so that I whimpered and sobbed with the pain, and after that I could breathe again. My head did not bleed where it had been struck but began swelling up there.

I crouched, recovering from the blow and the dizziness, and after a long while looked up again. Serpentine was standing there. It stood there. After a while I saw the hands moving slowly. They moved up slowly and came together at the navel, at the middle of the stone. There they pulled back and apart. They pulled open a long, wide rent,

or opening in the stone, like the doorway of a room into which I knew I was to enter. I got up crouching and shaking and took a step forward into the stone.

It was not like a room. It was stone, and I was in it. There was no light or breath or room. I think the rest of the vision all took place in the stone; that is where it all happened and was; but because of the human way human people have to see things, it seemed to change and to be other places, things, and beings.

As if the serpentine rock had crumbled and decayed into the red earth, after a while I was in the earth, part of the dirt. I could feel how the dirt felt. Presently I could feel rain coming into the dirt, coming down. I could feel it in a way that was like seeing, falling down on and into me, out of a sky that was all rain.

I would go to sleep and then be partly awake again, perceiving. I began feeling stones and roots, and along my left side I began to feel and hear cold water running, a creek in the rainy season. Veins of water underground went down and around through me to that creek, seeping in the dark through the dirt and stones,

Near the creek, I began to feel the big, deep roots of trees, and in the dirt everywhere, the fine, many roots of the grasses, the bulbs of brodiea and blue-eyed grass, the ground squirrel's heart beating, the mole asleep. I began to come up one of the great roots of a buckeye, up inside the trunk and out the leafless branches to the ends of the small outmost branches. From there I perceived the ladders of rain. These I climbed to the stairways of cloud. These I climbed to the paths of wind. There I stopped, for I was afraid to step out on the wind.

Coyote came down the wind path. She came like a thin woman with rough, dun hair on her head and arms, and a long, fine face with yellow eyes. Two of her children came with her, like coyote pups.

Coyote looked at me and said, "Take it easy. You can look down. You can look back."

I looked back and down under the wind. Below and behind me were dark ridges of forest with the rainbow shining across them, and light shining on the water on the leaves of the trees. I thought there were people on the rainbow but was not sure of that. Below and farther on were yellow hills of summer and a river among them going to the sea. In places the air below me was so full of birds that I could not see the ground, but only the light on their wings,

Coyote had a high, singing voice like several voices at once. She said, "Do you want to go on from here?"

I said, "I was going to go to the Sun."

"Go ahead. This is all my country." Coyote said that and then came past me on the wind, trotting on four legs as a coyote with her pups. I was standing alone on the wind there. So I went on ahead.

My steps on the wind were long and slow, like the Rainbow Dancers' steps. At each step the world below me looked different. At one step it was light; at the next one, dark. At the next step it was smoky; at the next, clear. At the next long step, black and gray clouds of ash or dust hid everything; and at the next, I saw a desert of sand with nothing growing or moving at all. I took a step, and everything on the surface of the world was one single town, roofs and ways with people swarming in them like the swarming in pond water under a lens. I took another step and saw the bottoms of the oceans laid dry, the lava slowly welling from long center seams, and huge desolate canyons far down in the shadow of the walls of the continents, like ditches below the walls of a barn. The next step I took, long and slow on the wind, I saw the surface of the world - blank, smooth, and pale, like the face of a baby I once saw that was born without forebrain or eyes. I took one more step and the hawk met me in the sunlight, in the quiet air, over the southwest slope of Grandmother Mountain.

It had been raining, and clouds were still dark in the northwest. The rain shone on the leaves of the forests in the canyons of the mountainside.

Of the vision given me in the Ninth House, I can tell some parts in writing, and some I can sing with the drum, but for most of it, I have not found words or music, though I have spent a good part of my life ever since learning how to look for them. I cannot draw what I saw, as my hand has no gift for making a likeness.

One reason it would be better drawn and is hard to tell is that there is no person in it. To tell a story, you say, "I did this" or "She saw that." When there is no I nor she, there is no story. I was, until I got to the Ninth House; there was the hawk, but I was not. The hawk was; the still air was. Seeing with the hawk's eyes is being without self. Self is mortal. That is the House of Eternity.

So of what the hawk's eyes saw, all I can here recall to words is this:

It was the universe of power. It was the network, field, and lines of the energies of all the beings, stars, and galaxies of stars, worlds, animals, minds, nerves, dust, the lace and foam of vibration that is being itself, all interconnected, every part part of another part, and the whole part of each part, and so comprehensible to itself only as a whole, boundless and unclosed.

At the Exchange it is taught that the electrical mental network of the City extends from all over the surface of the world out past the moon and the other planets to unimaginable distances among the stars:

In the vision all that vast web was one momentary glitter of light on one wave on the ocean of the universe of power, one fleck of dust

on one grass seed in unending fields of grass. The images of the light dancing on the waves of the sea or on dust motes, the glitter of light on ripe grass, the flicker of sparks from a fire, are all I have: No image can contain the vision, which contained all images. Music can mirror it better than words can, but I am no poet to make music of words. Foam and the scintillation of mica in rock, the flicker and sparkle of waves and dust, the working of the great broadcloth looms, and all dancing have reflected the hawk's vision for a moment to my mind; and indeed everything would do so, if my mind were clear and strong enough. But no mind or mirror can hold it without breaking.

There was a descent or drawing away, and I saw some things that I can describe. Here is one of them: In this lesser place or plane, which was what might be called the gods or the divine, beings enacted possibilities. These I, being human, recall as having human form. One of them came and shaped the vibrations of energies, closing their paths from gyre into wheel. This one was very strong and was crippled. He worked as blacksmith at the smithy, making wheels of energy, closed upon themselves,

terrible with power, flaming. He who made them was burnt away by them to a shell of cinder, with eyes like a potter's kiln when it is opened and hair of burning wires, but still he turned the paths of energy and closed them into wheels, locking power into power. All around this being now was black and hollow where the wheels turned and ground and milled. There were other beings who came as if flying, like birds in a storm, flying and crying across the wheels of fire to stop the turning and the work, but they were caught in the wheels and burst like feathers of flame. The miller was a thin shell of darkness now, very weak, burnt out, and he too was caught in the wheels' turning and burning and grinding and was ground to dust, like fine, black meal. The wheels as they turned kept growing and joining until the whole machine was interlocked cog within cog, and strained and brightened and burst into pieces. Every wheel as it burst was a flare of faces and eyes and flowers and beasts on fire - burning, exploding, destroyed, falling into black dust. That happened, and it was one flicker of brightness and dark in the universe of power, a bubble of foam, a flick of the shuttle, a fleck of mica. The dark dust, or meal, lay in the shape of open curves or spirals. It began to move and shift, and there was a scintillation in it, like dust in a shaft of sunlight. It began dancing. Then the dancing drew away and drew away, and closer by, to the left, something was there, crying like a little animal. That was myself, my mind and being in the world; and I began to become myself again; but my soul that had seen the vision was not entirely willing. Only my mind kept drawing it back to me from the Ninth House, calling and crying for it till it came.

I was lying on my right side on earth, in a small, warm room with earthen walls. The only light came from the red bar of an electric heater. Somewhere nearby people were singing a two-note chant. I was holding in my left hand a rock of serpentine, greenish with dark markings, quite round as if waterworn, though serpentine does not often wear round, but splits and crumbles. It was just large enough that I could close my fingers around it. I held this round stone for a long time and listened to the chanting until I went to sleep. When I woke up, after a while I felt the rock going immaterial so that my fingers began sinking into it, and it weighed less and less, until it was gone. I was a little grieved by this, for I had thought it a remarkable thing to come back from the Right Arm of the World with a piece of it in my hand; but as I grew clearer headed, I perceived the vanity of that notion. Years later the rock came back to me. I was walking down by Moon Creek with my sons when they were small boys. The younger one saw the rock in the water and picked it up, saying, "A world!" I told him to keep it in his heya-box, which he did. When he died, I put that rock back in the water of Moon Creek.

I had been in the vision for the first two days and nights of the Twenty-One Days of the Sun. I was very weak and tired, and they kept me in the heyimas all the rest of the Twenty-One Days. I could hear the long-singing, and sometimes I went into other rooms of the heyimas; they made me welcome even in the inmost room, where they were singing and dancing the Inner Sun and where I had entered the vision.

I would sit and listen and half-watch. But if I tried to follow the dancing with my eyes, or sing, or even touch the tongue-drum, the weakness would wash into me like a wave on sand, and I would go back into the little room and lie down on the earth, in the earth.

They waked me to listen to the Morning Carol; that was the first time in twenty-one days that I climbed the ladder and saw the sun, that day, the day of the Sun Rising.

The people dancing the Inner Sun had been in charge of me. They had told me that I was in danger and that if I approached another vision, I should try to turn away from it, as I was not strong enough for it yet. They had told me not to dance; and they kept bringing me food, so good and so kindly given that I could not refuse it, and ate it with enjoyment. After the Sun Risen days were past, certain scholars of the heyimas took me in their charge. Tarweed, a man of my House, and the woman Milk of the Obsidian, were my guides. It was now time that I begin to learn the recounting of the vision.

When I began, I thought there was nothing to learn. All I had to do was say what I had seen.

Milk worked with words, Tarweed worked with words, drum, and

matrix chanting. They had me go very slowly, telling very little at a time, sometimes one word only, and repeating what I had been able to tell, singing it with the matrix chant so that as much as possible might be truly recalled and given and could be recalled and given again.

When I began thus to find out what it is to say what one has seen, and when the great oomplexity and innumerable vivid details of the vision overwhelmed my imagination and surpassed my ability to describe,

I feared that I would lose it all before I could grasp one fragment of it and that even if I remembered some of it, I would never understand any of it. My guides reassured me and quieted my impatience. Milk said, "We have some training in this craft, and you have none. You have to learn to speak sky with an earth tongue. Listen: If a baby were carried up the Mountain, could she walk back down, until she learned to walk?"

Tarweed explained to me that as I learned to apprehend mentally what I had perceived in vision, I would approach the condition of living in both Towns; and so, he said, "there's no great hurry."

I said, "But it will take years and years!"

He said, "You've been at it for a thousand years already. Gall said you were an old soul."

It bothered me that I was often not sure whether Tarweed was joking or not joking. That always bothers young people, and however old my soul might be, my mind was fifteen. I had to live a while before I understood that a lot of things can only be said joking and not joking at the same time. I had to come clear back to Coyote's House from the Hawk's House to learn that, and sometimes I still forget it.

Tarweed's way was joking, shocking, stirring, but he was gentle; I had no fear of him. I had been afraid of Milk ever since she had looked at me in the Blood Lodge and said, "What are you here for?" She was a great scholar and was Singer of the Lodge. Her way was calm, patient, impersonal, but she was not gentle, and I feared her. With Tarweed she was polite, but it was plain that her manners masked contempt. She thought a man's place was in the woods and fields and workshops, not among sacred and intellectual things. In the Lodge I had heard her say the old gibe, "A man fucks with his brain and thinks with his penis." Tarweed knew well enough what she thought, but intellectual men are used to having their capacities doubted and their achievements snubbed; he did not seem to mind her arrogance as much as I sometimes did, even to the point of trying to defend him against her once, saying, "Even if he is a man, he thinks like a woman!"

It did no good, of course; and if it was partly true, it wasn't wholly true, because the thing that was most important of all to me I

could not speak of to Tarweed, a man, and a man of my House: and to Milk, arrogant and stern as she was, and a woman who had lived all her life celibate, I did not even need to speak of it. I began to, once, feeling that I must, and she stopped me. "What is proper for me to know of this, I know," she said. "Vision is transgression! The vision is to be shared; the transgression cannot be."

I did not understand that. I was very much afraid of going out of the heyimas and being caught in my old life again, going the wrong way again in false thinking and despair. A half-month or so after the Sun, I began to feel and say that I was still weak and ill and could not leave the heyimas. To this Tarweed said, "Aha! About time for you to go home!"

I thought him most unfeeling. When I was working with Milk, in my worry I began crying, and presently I said, "I wish I had never had this vision!"

Milk looked at me, a glance across the eyes, like being whipped in the face with a thin branch. She said, "You did not have a vision."

I sniveled and stared at her.

"You had nothing. You have nothing. The house stands. You can live in a corner of it, or all of it, or go outside it as you choose." So Milk said and left me.

I stayed alone in the small room. I began to look at it, the small warm room with earth walls and floor and roof, underground. The walls were earth: the whole earth. Outside them was the sky: the whole sky. The room was the universe of power. I was in my vision. It was not in me.

So I went home to live and try to stay on the right way.

Part of most days I went to the heyimas to study with Tarweed or to the Blood Lodge to study with Milk. My health was sound, but I was still tired and sleepy, and my household did not get very much work out of me. All my family but my father were busy, restless people, eager to work and talk but never to be still. Among them, after the month in the heyimas, I felt like a pebble in a mountain creek, bounced and buffeted. But I could go to work with my father. Milk had suggested to him that he take me with him when he worked. Tarweed had questioned her about that, saying that the craft was spiritually dangerous, and Milk had replied, in the patient, patronizing tone she used to men, "Don't worry about that. It was danger that enabled her."

So I went back to working with power. I learned the art carefully and soberly, and set no more fires.

I learned drumming with Tarweed, and speaking mystery with Milk. But it was all slow, slow, and my fear kept growing, fear and impatience. The image of the roan horse's rider was not in my mind,

as it had been, but was the center of my fear, I never went to ride, and kept away from my friends who cared for the horses, and stayed out of the pastures where the horses were. I tried never to think about the Summer dancing, the games and races. I tried never to think about lovemaking, although my mother's sister had a new husband, and they made love every night in the next room with a good deal of noise. I began to fear and dislike myself, and fasted and purged to weaken myself.

I told Tarweed nothing of all this, shame preventing me; nor did I ever speak of it to Milk, fear preventing me,

So the World was danced, and next would come the Moon. The thought of that dance made me more and more frightened: I felt trapped by it. When the first night of the Moon came, I went down into my heyimas, meaning to stay there the whole time, closing my ears to the love songs. I started drumming a vision-tune that Tarweed had brought back from his dragonfly visions. Almost at once I entered trance and went into the house of anger.

In that house it was black and hot, with a yellowish glimmering like heat lightning and a dull muttering noise underfoot and in the walls. There was an old woman in there, very black, with too many arms. She called me, not by the name I then had. Berry, but Flicker: "Flicker, come here! Flicker, come here!" I understood that Flicker was my name, but I did not come.

The old woman said, "What are you sulking about? Why don't you go fuck with your brother in Chukulmas? Desire unacted is corruption. Must Not is a slave owner, Ought Not is a slave. Energy constrained turns the wheels of evil. Look what you're dragging with you! How can you run the gyre, how can you handle power, chained like that? Superstition! Superstition!"

I found that my legs were both fastened with bolts and hasps to a huge boulder of serpentine rock so that I could not move at all. I thought that if I fell down, the boulder would roll on me and crush me.

The old woman said, "What are you wearing on your head? That's no Moon Dance veil. Superstition! Superstition!"

I put up my hands and found my head covered with a heavy helmet made of black obsidian. I was seeing and hearing through this black, murky glass, which came down over my eyes and ears.

"Take it off, Flicker!" the old woman said.

I said, "Not at your bidding!"

I could hardly see or hear her as the helmet pressed heavier and thicker on my head and the boulder pushed against my legs and back.

She cried, "Break free! You are turning into stone! Break free!"

I would not obey her. I chose to disobey. With my hands I pressed

the obsidian helmet into my ears and eyes and forehead until it sank in and became part of me, and I pushed myself back into the boulder until it became part of my legs and body. Then I stood there, very stiff and heavy and hard, but I could walk, and I could see and hear, now that the dark glass was not over my ears and eyes but was part of them. I saw that the house was all on fire, burning and smoldering, floor, walls, and roof. A black bird, a crow, was flying in the smoke from one room to the next. The old woman was burning, her clothes and flesh and hair smoldering. The crow flew around her and cried to me, "Sister, get out, you'd better get out!"

There is nothing but anger in the house of anger. I said, "No!"

The crow cawed, saying, "Sister, fetch water, water of the spring!" Then it flew out through the burning wall of the house. Just as it went, it looked back at me with a man's face, beautiful and strong, with curly, fiery hair streaming upward. Then the walls of fire sank down into the walls of the Serpentine heyimas where I was sitting drumming on the three-note drum. I was still drumming, but a different pattern, a new one.

After that vision, I was called Flicker; the scholars agreed that it's best to use the name that that Grandmother gives you, even if you don't do what she says. After that vision, I went up to the Springs of the River, as Crow had said to do; and after it I was freed from my fear of my desire.

The central vision is central; it is not for anything outside itself; indeed there is nothing outside it. What I beheld in the Ninth House is, as a cloud or a mountain is. We make use of such visions, make meanings out of them, find images in them, live on them, but they are not for us or about us any more than the world is. We are part of them. There are other kinds of vision, all farther from the center and nearer to the mortal self; one of those is the turning vision, which is about a person's own life. The vision in which that Grandmother named me was a turning vision.

The Summer came, and the people came down from Chukulmas. My brother of the Serpentine did not ride his roan horse in the races; a girl of the Obsidian of Chukulmas rode that horse, and he rode a sorrel mare. The roan stallion won all races and was much praised. After that summer he would race no more, but be put to stud, they said. I did not ride, but watched the races and the games. It is hard to say how I felt. My throat ached all the time, and I kept saying silentiy inside myself, goodbye, goodbye! But

what I was saying goodbye to was already gone. I was mourning and yet unmoved. The girl was a good rider, and beautiful, and I thought maybe they are going to come inland together; but it did not hurt or concern me. What I wanted was to be gone from Telina, to

begin living the life that followed the turning vision, that followed the gyre.

So in the heat of the summertime I went with Tarweed upriver, to the Springs of the River at Wakwaha.

On the Mountain I lived in the host-house of the Serpentine, and worked mostly as electrician's assistant at odd jobs around the sacred buildings and the Archive and Exchange. In the morning I would come outdoors at sunrise. All beyond and below the porch of that house I would see a vast pluming blankness, the summer fog filling the Valley, while the first rays of the sun brightened the rocks of the Mountain's peaks above me, and I would sing as I had been taught:

"It is the Valley of the puma, where the lion walks, where the lion wakes, shining, shining in the Seventh House!"

Later, in the rainy season, the puma walked on the Mountain itself, darkening the summits and the Springs in cloud and gray mist. To wake in the silence of that rainless, all-concealing fog was to wake to dream, to breathe the lion's breath.

Much of each day on the Mountain I spent in the heyimas, and at times slept there. I worked with the scholars and visionaries of Wakwaha at the techniques of revisioning, of recounting, and of music. I did not practice dancing or painting much, as I had no gift for them, but practiced recalling and recounting in spoken and written language and with the drum.

I had, as many people have, exaggerated notions of how visionaries live. I expected a strained, athletic, ascetic existence, always stretched towards the ineffable. In fact, it was a dull kind of life. When people are in vision, they can't look after themselves, and when they come back from it, they may be extremely tired, or excited and bewildered, and in either case, need quietness without distractions and demands. In other words, it's like childbearing or any hard, intense work. One supports and protects the worker. Revisioning and recounting are much the same, though not quite so hard.

In the host-house I fasted only before the great wakwa; I ate lightly, with some care of which foods I ate, and drank little wine and watered it. If you are going into vision or revision, you don't want to keep changing yourself and going in a different way - through starving one time, the next time through drunkenness, or cannabis, or trance-singing, or whatever. What you want is moderation and continuity. If one is an ecstatic, of course it's another matter; that is not work but burning.

So the life I led in Wakwaha was dull and peaceful, much the same from day to day and season to season, and suited and pleased my mind and heart so that I desired nothing else. All the work I did in those years on the Mountain was revisioning and recounting the vision

of the Ninth House that had been given me; I gave all I could of it to the scholars of the Serpentine for their records and interpretations, in which our guidance as a people lies. They were kind, true kin, family of my House, and I at last a child of

that House again, not self-exiled. I thought I had come home and would live there all my life, telling and drumming, going into vision and coming back from it, dancing in the beautiful dancing place of the Five High Houses, drinking from the Springs of the River.

The Grass was late in the third year I lived in Wakwaha. Some days after it ended and some days before the Twenty-One Days began, I was about to go up the ladder of the Serpentine heyimas when Hawk Woman came to me. I thought she was one of the people of the heyimas, until she cried the hawk's cry, "kiyir, kiyir!" I turned, and she said, "Dance the Sun upon the Mountain, Flicker, and after that go down. Maybe you should learn how to dye cloth." She laughed, and flew up as the hawk through the entrance overhead.

Other people came where I was standing at the foot of the ladder. They had heard the hawk's cry, and some saw her fly up through the entrance of the heyimas.

After that I had neither vision nor revision of the Ninth House or any house or kind.

I was bereft and relieved. That terrible grandeur had been hard to bear, to bring back, to share and give and lose over and over. It had all been beyond my strength, and I was not sorry to cease revisioning. But when I thought that I had lost all vision and must soon leave Wakwaha, I began to grieve. I thought about those people whom I had thought were my kinfolk, long ago when I was a child, before I was afraid. They were gone, and now I too must go, leaving these kinfolk of my House of Wakwaha, and go live among strangers the rest of my life.

A woman-living man of the Serpentine of Wakwaha, Deertongue, who had taught me and sung with me and given me friendship, saw that I was downcast and anxious, and said to me, "Listen. You think everything is done. Nothing is done. You think the door is shut. No door is shut. What did Coyote say to you at the beginning of it all?"

I said, "She said to take it easy."

Deertongue nodded his head and laughed.

I said, "But Hawk said to go down."

"She didn't say not to come back."

"But I have lost the visions!"

"But you have your wits! Where is the center of your life, Flicker?"

I thought, not very long, and answered, "There. In that vision. In the Ninth House."

He said, "Your life turns on that center. Only don't blind your intellect by hankering after vision! You know that the vision is not your self. The hawk turns upon the hawk's desire. You will come round home and find the door wide open."

I danced the Sun upon the Mountain, as Hawk Woman had said to do, and after that I began to feel that I must go. There were some people living in Wakwaha who sought vision or ecstasy by continuous fasting or drug taking, and lived in hallucination; such people came not to know vision from imagination and lived without honesty, making up the world all the time. I was afraid that if I stayed there I might begin imitating them, as Deertongue had warned me. After all, I had gone wrong that way once before.

So I said goodbye to people, and on a cold, bright morning I went down the Mountain. A young redtail hawk circled, crying over the canyons, "kiyir! kiyir!" so mournfully that I cried myself.

I went back to my mothers' household in Telina-na. My uncle had married and moved out, so I had his small room to myself; that was a good thing, since my cousin had married and had a child, and the household was as crowded and restless as ever. I went back to work with my father, learning both theory and practice with him, and after two years I became a member of the Millers Art. He and I continued to work together often. My life was nearly as quiet as it had been in Wakwaha. Sometimes I would spend days in the heyimas drumming; there were no visions, but the silence inside the drumming was what I wanted.

So the seasons went along, and I was thinking about what Hawk Woman had said. I was rewiring an old house, Seven Steps House in the northeast arm of Telina, and while I was working there on a hot day, a man of one of the households brought me some lemonade, and we fell to talking, and so again the next day. He was a Blue Clay man from Chukulmas who had married a Serpentine woman of Telina. They had been given two children, the younger born sevai. She had left the children with him and left her mothers' house, going across town to marry a Red Adobe man. I knew her, she was one of the people I had gambled with as a child, but I had never talked to this man, Stillwater, who lived in his children's grandmother's house. He worked mostly as a chemist and tanner and housekeeper. We talked and got on well and met to talk again. I came inland with him, and we decided to marry.

My father was against it, because Stillwater had two children in his household already and so I would bear none; but that was what I wanted. My grandmother and mother were not heartily for anything I did, because I had always disappointed them, and they did not want three more people in our house, which was crowded enough. But that,

too, was what I wanted. Everything I wanted in those years came to be.

Stillwater and the little boys and I made a household on the ground floor of Seven Steps House, where their grandmother lived on the first floor. She was a lazy, sweet-tempered woman, very fond of Stillwater and the children, and we got on very well. We lived in that house fourteen years. All that time I had what I wanted and was contented, like a ewe with two lambs in a safe pasture, with my head down eating the grass. All that time was like a long day in summer, in the fenced fields, or in a quiet house when the doors are closed to keep the rooms cool. That was my life's day. Before it and after it were the twilights and the dark, when things and the shadows of things become one.

Our elder son - and this was a satisfaction to my grandmother at last - went to learn with the Doctors Lodge on White Sulfur Creek as soon as he entered his sprouting years, and by the time he was twenty he was living at the Lodge much of the time. The younger died when he had lived sixteen years. Living with his pain and always increasing weakness and seeing him lose the use of his hands and the sight in his eyes had driven his brother to seek to be a healer, but living with his fearless soul had been my chief joy. He was like a little hawk that came into one's hands for the warmth, for a moment, fearless and harmless, but hurt. After he died, Stillwater lost heart, and began longing for his old home. Presently he went back to Chukulmas to live in his mothers' house. Sometimes I went to visit him there.

I went back to my childhood home, my mothers' house, where my grandmother and mother and father and aunt and cousin and her husband and two children were. They were still busy and noisy; it was not where I wanted to be. I would go to the heyimas and drum, but that was not what I wanted, either. I missed Stillwater's company, but it was no longer the time for us to live together; that was done. It was something else wanted, but I could not find out what.

In the Blood Lodge one day they told me that Milk, who was now truly an old woman, had had a stroke. My son came with me to see her and helped her in her recovery; and since she was alone, I went

to stay with her while she needed help. It suited her to have me there, and so I lived with her. It was comfortable for both of us; but she was looking for her last name and learning how to die, and although I could be of some help to her while she did that and could learn from her, it wasn't what I wanted myself, yet.

One day a little before the Summer I was working in the storage barns above Moon Creek. The Art had put in a new generator there, and I was checking out the wiring to the threshers, some of which needed reinsulation; the mice had been at it. I was working away

there in a dark, dusty crawl space, hearing the mice scuttering about overhead in the rafters and between the walls. Presently I noticed with part of my attention that several people were in the crawl space with me, watching what I was doing. They were grayish-brown people with long, slender, white hands and feet and bright eyes: I had never seen them before, but they seemed familiar. I said, while I went on working. "I wish you would not take the insulation off the wires. A fire could start. There must be better things to eat in a grain barn!"

The people laughed a little, and the darkest one said in a high soft voice, "Bedding."

They looked behind them then and went away quickly and quietly. Somebody else was there. I felt one little chill of fear. At first I couldn't see him clearly in that twilight of the crawl space; then I saw it was Tarweed.

"You never ride horses anymore, Flicker," he said.

"Riding is for the young, Tarweed," I said.

"Are you old?"

"Nearly forty years old."

"And you don't miss riding?"

He was teasing me, as people had teased me once about being in love with the roan horse.

"No, I don't miss that."

"What do you miss?"

"My child that died."

"Why should you miss him?"

"He is dead."

"So am I," said Tarweed. And so he was. He had died five years ago.

So I knew then what it was I missed, what I wanted. It was only not to be shut into the House of Earth. I did not have to go in and out the doors, if only I could see those who did. There was Tarweed, and he laughed a little, like the mice.

He did not say anything more, but watched me in the shadows.

When I was done with the work, he was gone.

When I left the barn, I saw the barn owl high upon a rafter, sleeping.

I went home to Milk's household. I told her at supper about Tarweed and the mice.

She listened and began to cry a little. She was weak since the stroke, and her fierceness sometimes turned to tears. She said. "You were always ahead of me, going ahead of me!"

I had never known that she envied me. It made me sad to know it, and yet I wanted to laugh at the way we waste our feelings. "Somebody has to open the door!" I said. I showed her the people who

were coming into the room, the kind of people I used to see when I was a young child. I knew they were indeed my kin, but I did not know who they were. I asked Milk, "Who are they?"

She was bewildered at first and could not see well, and complained. The people began to speak, and after a while she answered them. Sometimes they spoke this language, and sometimes I did not understand what they said; but she answered them eagerly.

When she grew tired, they went away quietly, and I helped her to bed. As she began to go to sleep, I saw a little child come and lie down beside her. She put her arms around it. Every night after that until Milk died in the winter, the child came to her bed to sleep.

Once I spoke of it, saying, "your daughter." Milk looked at me with that whipping look in her one good eye. She said, "Not my daughter. Yours."

So I keep that house now, with the daughter I never bore, the child of my first love, and with others of my family. Sometimes when I sweep the floor of that house, I see the dust in a shaft of sunlight, dancing in curves and spirals, flickering.

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